

Book 2 - Growing Up

Chapter 1 – Magical Beast, Shadowmouse

“Magical beast ‘Shadowmouse’? Grandpa Doebling, what special qualities does a Shadowmouse possess, and what rank does it have amongst magical beasts?” Linley and Doebling Cowart were mentally communicating, but at the same time, Linley was staring excitedly at him.

Doebling Cowart smiled. He pretended to hem and haw for a few seconds, then slowly said, “The magical beast ‘Shadowmouse’ cannot easily be hemmed into a particular rank. This is because it represents an entire race of mice. Amongst rat-type creatures, there’s two major types; the Stoneater Rat, and the Shadowmouse. But both the Stoneater Rat and the Shadowmouse are omnivores. They can eat anything, whether it is stones, bones, or even meat.”

Linley mentally nodded.

Just now, he had seen that black Shadowmouse nibbling on a rock.

“Magical beasts are divided into nine ranks. Magical beasts of the first rank are the weakest. And of course, above the ninth rank are magical beasts at the Saint-level!” Doebling Cowart smiled at Linley. “Linley, the weakest type of Stoneater Rat is the Grey Stoneater Rat. Stoneater Rats of the first to third ranks are all grey in color, with some minor shading differences. A Stoneater Rat, upon reaching the fourth rank, will see its fur turn pure silver. Upon reaching the seventh rank, its fur will turn gold! A gold-colored Stoneater Rat will at least be a magical beast of the seventh rank, and at most a magical beast of the eighth rank.”

“Linley, the Stoneater Rat race is an extremely terrifying race, primarily because they have huge numbers, and extremely sharp teeth, far sharper than the Shadowmouse race. When large numbers of Stoneater Rats appear, even an army of a hundred thousand people cannot hope to withstand them.” Doebling Cowart sighed as he spoke.

Doebling Cowart was recalling a catastrophe he had witnessed long ago.

The Stoneater Rat was not as fast as the Shadowmouse, but its body was as tough and durable as steel. The higher ranked a Stoneater Rat was, the tougher its body would become, and the sharper its teeth would become. Its body seemed small, but that was deceptive; in large numbers, they were absolutely terrifying.

“The weapons used by most armies cannot kill a Stoneater Rat, but a Stoneater Rat can easily kill and devour a soldier.” Doebling Cowart sighed again.

In Linley's imagination, there appeared the image of a vast, endless flood of Stoneater Rats descending from the wilderness or mountains and attacking an army of men. Imagining that flood of Stoneater Rats devouring the entire army, Linley's heart shivered.

Absolutely terrifying.

"Amongst the two races of rat-type creatures, the Stoneater Rat has an extremely tough defense, sharp teeth, and huge numbers. But Shadowmice? There are quite a large number of Shadowmice as well, but their numbers are far less than Stoneater Rats." Doehring Cowart seemed like an encyclopedia, all-wise and all-knowing.

"And Shadowmice? How powerful is a Shadowmouse?" Linley asked.

There was a Shadowmouse not too far from him. Naturally, Linley wanted to know more about how powerful they were.

"The weakest Stoneater Rat is a beast of the first rank. But the Shadowmouse is different! The weakest Shadowmouse is a magical beast of the third rank, with jet black fur. When its entire body turns blue in color, that is a sign that it has reached the fifth rank. And when all of its fur has turned violet, that means it has at least reached the seventh rank, and at most the eighth rank." Doehring Cowart's words were clear and precise.

Linley nodded inwardly.

Based on potential power, a Shadowmouse was not inferior at all to a Stoneater Rat.

"Grandpa Doehring, based on what you just said, a Shadowmouse of the third or fourth rank would have pure black fur. Only upon reaching the fifth rank would its fur turn blue. So are you saying that little guy there is a magical beast of the third or fourth rank?" Linley followed up with more questions.

"This black colored Shadowmouse is not ordinary."

Doehring Cowart frowned as he spoke. "The Stoneater Rat is famed for its toughness and its sharp teeth, while the Shadowmouse is famed for its speed and its sharp teeth! Speed is thus a very good way to determine the strength of any particular Shadowmouse."

"It moved really fast, tens of meters in the blink of an eye. But since it is a Shadowmouse, I guess that isn't out of the ordinary." Linley still remembered its earlier movements clearly.

Doehring Cowart nodded. "Shadowmice are indeed very fast, but for an infant Shadowmouse to already have reached the speed of an adult Shadowmouse is definitely out of the ordinary." A hint of a smile was on Doehring Cowart's face.

"Out of the ordinary?" Linley looked at Doehring Cowart.

Doehring Cowart continued, "Right. For an infant Shadowmouse to have reached the speed of an adult Shadowmouse of the fourth rank means that when it grows up, it has the possibility of becoming a violet-colored Shadowmouse of the seventh rank. I suspect...that it is the child of a Violet Shadowmouse."

"The child of a Violet Shadowmouse?" Linley said questioningly. "But its fur is black."

Doehring Cowart laughed. "Linley, Violet Shadowmice and Blue Shadowmice, when born, all start off with black fur. Only as their strength grows will the color of their fur slowly change! The color of their fur is proof of their power!"

Linley suddenly understood. "So that is how it is!"

"Grandpa Doehring, then based on your words, this Shadowmouse is really amazingly fast. The Shadowmouse in front of me is slightly faster than even Uncle Hillman, but you are telling me that it is comparable to a Shadowmouse of the fourth rank. For a magical beast of the fourth rank to be faster than a warrior of the sixth rank..." Linley couldn't help but sigh in amazement.

Doehring Cowart laughed. "Linley, if they weren't so fast, why would they be called Shadowmice?"

At the same rank of power, a Shadowmouse, when running, was far, far faster than a human warrior.

"A Shadowmouse is a rare prize as magical beasts go, especially the seventh-ranked Violet Shadowmouse. Many a magus would want a Violet Shadowmouse, but they are simply too fast. An adult Violet Shadowmouse is valuable, but extremely hard to catch and tame. It is much easier to catch and tame an infant Violet Shadowmouse, but it is extremely rare for one to be able to meet an infant Violet Shadowmouse by itself." Doehring Cowart smiled as he looked at Linley.

Linley could imagine it as well.

A Violet Shadowmouse was a magical beast of the seventh rank at least, which meant that at the very least, they had a Velocidragon's level of power.

“Linley, a Violet Shadowmouse is considered a king amongst rats, and can command a large swarm of Shadowmice. Although Shadowmice are not as numerous as Stoneater Rats, they are still quite numerous. An infant Violet Shadowmouse would therefore be protected by many adult Shadowmice.”

Doehring Cowart glanced sideways at that distant black Shadowmouse, still chewing some rocks.

“To be so powerful when still so young, eight or nine times out of ten, means that it is the infant of a Violet Shadowmouse. I really wonder how he managed to make his way to your clan’s manor, without a single adult Shadowmouse guard.” Doehring Cowart said with an air of amazement.

Linley also agreed with Doehring Cowart’s words.

“Linley.” Doehring Cowart suddenly looked at Linley with a strange look in his eyes. His voice carrying a hint of enticement he said, “Regardless of why the the infant Violet Shadowmouse is here...would you want to collect it as a companion? Shadowmice grow very rapidly, especially Violet Shadowmice. In ten years or so, it will finish its growth cycle. By that time, you would have a magical beast companion of at least the seventh, and possibly even the eighth rank.”

Hearing his words, Linley’s heart fluttered.

Taming a magical beast of the seventh or eighth rank is extremely difficult. But taming them when they are in the infant stage is far easier.

In addition, not all infant magical beasts are the same. Some grow up very quickly, while some grow up very slowly. Amongst the ‘dragon’ type magical beasts, some can take a thousand years to mature. Most humans simply don’t have the ability to wait so long. Shadowmice were one of the types of magical beasts that grow up fairly quickly.

But encountering an infant Violet Shadowmouse is simply too rare of an occasion.

After all, the more powerful a magical beast is, the more importance it attaches to protecting its young. Although it wasn’t too clear why this young Shadowmouse had appeared within his manor, it was an indisputable fact that it was indeed here, alone.

“Linley, possessing a Violet Shadowmouse is equivalent to possessing an entire Shadowmouse army!” Doehring Cowart smiled at Linley. “This is why the Violet Shadowmouse is a far more precious magical beast than many other beasts of the seventh or eighth rank.”

Doehring Cowart continued to try and entice Linley.

How could a seven or eight year old Linley resist?

“Grandpa Doehring, how would I tame this Violet Shadowmouse?” Linley looked excitedly at Doehring Cowart.

Doehring Cowart felt very happy. “If little Linley really can tame this Shadowmouse, in the future, I can be a bit more at ease.” Doehring Cowart knew very well that as a spirit, he had no mageforce of his own at all. A Saint-level Grand Magus without mageforce really didn’t have many attacking abilities.

There was no way for him to protect Linley.

But after the past half year, he had already begun to consider this pure, hard-working child as his own grandson. Naturally, he wanted to come up with ways to improve Linley’s strength.

“Linley, you must be calm.” Doehring Cowart said solemnly. “Even if this is just a Violet Shadowmouse infant, his speed is comparable to a mature Shadowmouse of the fourth rank. Even your Uncle Hillman won’t be able to catch him. You simply don’t have the ability to forcibly subdue him, and you also are not able to utilize a soul-binding magical formation.

Linley was startled.

His overheated mind suddenly calmed down. Laughing bitterly, he said, “Now I remember. To tame a magical beast, the first way is to forcibly subdue him, and the second way is to use a soul-binding magical formation, which can only be utilized by a magus of the seventh rank, at least.

Linley couldn’t help but feel a bit disappointed.

Alas, he was too weak. Even though he had the good fortune to encounter a Violet Shadowmouse infant, he didn’t have the ability to tame it.

Chapter 2 – A Clumsy Method (Part 1)

“Linley, don’t be discouraged. I only meant to say that there is no way for you to forcibly subdue him, I didn’t say that it is impossible to tame him at all.” Doehring Cowart laughed self-indulgently. “If he was an adult Shadowmouse, I probably wouldn’t be able to help, but...he’s just a baby Shadowmouse. As a Saint-level

Grand Magus, I have some methods which can be effective in dealing with a baby Shadowmouse. In addition, there is no need for a soul-binding magical formation."

Linley's calm mind immediately grew agitated again, and he turned to look at Doehring Cowart with shining eyes.

"Grandpa Doehring, quick, tell me, what's your plan?" Linley excitedly spoke to him mentally.

Doehring Cowart said with a self-satisfied smile, "It's simple. The 'soul-binding' technique used by the soul-binding magical formation creates a master-servant bond. And naturally, if one can subdue a magical beast, one is qualified to become its master. Right now, there's no way for us to initiate a 'master-servant bond', so we can only take a step back...and initiate a 'bond of equals' with the Shadowmouse."

"Bond of equals?" Linley said curiously. "What is that? I've never heard of it."

"It's normal for you not to have heard of it. Even five thousand years ago, during the era in which I lived, very few people know about the 'bond of equals'." Doehring Cowart's eyes crinkled as he smiled. "A bond of equals represents that you and the magical beast share the same status in the relationship, with no one being the master or being the servant. As a matter of fact, a 'bond of equals' will give you a more intimate relationship with your magical beast, and your magical beast will more whole-heartedly assist you, giving the two of you superior teamwork."

Linley now understood.

"Oh? Grandpa Doehring, from your words, it sounds like there's a lot of advantages to this 'bond of equals'. Why don't most people use it?" Linley queried.

Doehring Cowart laughed loudly. "Because, the 'bond of equals' is not initiated by people. Rather, it is initiated by the magical beast."

"Initiated by the magical beast?!" Linley was stunned.

No wonder there was no need for setting up a soul-binding magical formation. This bond was initiated by the magical beast itself. Doehring Cowart continued, "Every single magical beast, upon birth, has the ability to initiate a 'bond of equals', but in their entire life, a magical beast may only enter this bond a single time. It isn't like the soul-binding master-servant relationship, where once the master dissolves the relationship, someone else can use another soul-binding technique to tame the beast again."

Linley nodded.

“But it is extremely difficult to convince a magical beast to willingly initiate the ‘bond of equals’,” Doehring Cowart continued more seriously. “You need to convince a magical beast that you are like family and make it decide that it cannot bear to part from you. Only then would it willingly enter a ‘bond of equals’ with you.”

Linley slightly nodded.

“Adult magical beasts have very high intelligence, so if you want to move the heart of an adult magical beast and make it view you as family, it is almost impossible.” Doehring Cowart sighed. “But juveniles are different. It is much like how human babies have low intelligence and can easily be tricked into liking you by, say, giving them some tasty food. The intelligence of magical beast babies is even lower. As long as you often feed him, he will like you. Then, spend some time playing with him. In a short period of time, this magical beast will come to adore you. This is especially true for an infant magical beast who has been separated from his community. Those are even easier to tame.”

Hearing Doehring Cowart’s words, Linley felt as though a great weight had been lifted from him.

“So it’s just a matter of coaxing a little kid.” Linley laughed.

He was extremely experienced in this. Ever since he was young, he accompanied his younger brother, Wharton, playing with him and coaxing him. Linley was very much a master in the art.

“Linley, don’t be too cocky. If you want to coax an infant magical beast, you have to pay attention to many details. If you aren’t careful, this little Shadowmouse might just give you a bite.” Doehring Cowart reminded.

“Give me a bite?”

Linley looked at the far-off Shadowmouse. The sound of it crunching through rocks could be heard from afar. The Shadowmouse was chewing through it as easily as he normally would’ve chewn through bread. Linley didn’t question the sharpness of the teeth of this Shadowmouse in the slightest.

“Then what should I do?” Linley immediately lost his confidence.

“Relax. Based on my method, you won’t have any problems at all. Based on this ‘clumsy idea’ that I have, all you need is time and patience. Don’t get agitated or impatient.” Doehring Cowart slowly began to explain his ‘clumsy idea’. “Linley, a Shadowmouse is an omnivore; it will eat anything. Bones, rocks, meat. But its

favorite food is still meat, especially roasted meat. This is based on the experience of elders.”

“Therefore, just go up Mt. Wushan to kill some beasts, then place the cooked meat far away from him on the ground. Remember. Do not try to get near him. Each time he eats, wait for him to approach you.” Doehring Cowart laughed. “If you try to approach him, it might cause him to attack you out of fear! But if he approaches you, then there won’t be any danger at all.”

“This method is clumsy, but very safe.” Doehring Cowart said with a smile.

Linley understood.

This method really was a bit clumsy, but it was also simple and direct.

“Grandpa Doehring, won’t this Shadowmouse run all over the place?” Linley was worried that if he went and got some roasted meat, he might come back to find the Shadowmouse had gone. There would be nothing he could do then.

“Who can say? It all comes down to your luck. But I believe that in a short period of time, it won’t go anywhere.” Doehring Cowart said.

“Fine, I’ll go kill some wild beasts.” Linley nodded, then quickly ran towards Mt. Wushan. His footsteps were very sure, but strangely made no sound at all. This was the proof of one’s ability as a earth-style magus.

After departing from the back gate of the manor, Linley began to run at a normal pace, and his footsteps began to sound again.

“Young master Linley, headed to the back mountain again?” Uncle Hiri, broom in hand, was dusting the floor. He saw Linley and smiled at him.

“Yup.” Linley assented as he sped up his pace.

Over the past half year, Linley had been going to Mt. Wushan to train in magecraft almost every afternoon. No one else knew that he was training in magecraft, of course. But they all knew that in the afternoons, Linley liked to spend his spare time playing in the mountains.

.....

Autumn. Most of the trees on Mt. Wushan had shed their leaves, but there were still many evergreen trees, as well as some maple trees covered in deep red leaves.

A vigorous, nimble shadow could be seen piercing through the mountain forests. Linley ran silently but nimbly and fast. After having absorbed earth essence for half a year, Linley didn't just possess mageforce; his physical strength had been raised as well.

By this point in time, Linley's body was comparable to the average 15-16 year old in Wushan township, and possessed the strength of a warrior of the first rank.

There were many squirrels and rabbits on Mt. Wushan, while there weren't many fierce beasts. This was the reason why most adults didn't worry too much about their children playing in the mountain. After all, Mt. Wushan was a fairly small mountain, with very few large animals, much less magical beasts.

Linley's footsteps suddenly halted, as he saw up ahead a dull-yellow colored rabbit eating grass.

Even a very cautious wild rabbit wasn't able to detect Linley in the slightest.

"Wild rabbits have a fast reaction time, and run fast also. Best if I use magic." Linley immediately began to chant the words to a magical incantation.

Linley felt that in the center of his chest, a small gust of earth-style mageforce began to throb. Most warriors stored their battle-qi approximately 10 centimeters below their navel, but magi stored their mageforce directly in the middle of their chests, at the middle of a line between their nipples. But spiritual energy, of course, was stored in their head.

It didn't make much of a difference if a magical incantation was mumbled or shouted. The only thing that mattered was making sure one's spiritual energy was guided by the energies released by the incantation.

In scant seconds, Linley finished his incantation, and his eyes lit up as he stared at the hare.

Earth-style, magic of the first rank – Earth Spike!

Poof!

A sharp spike of earth erupted from directly beneath the wild hare, piercing directly into its chest. Scarlet blood flowed out, dying its soft fur. Shocked at the ambush, the hare immediately began to struggle, but all it succeeded in doing was make itself lose blood even faster.

Chapter 3 – A Clumsy Method (Part 2)

Linley immediately ran over and grabbed the rabbit by the throat with one hand. CRACK! The rabbit, previously struggling in agony, twitched twice, then went still. Ever since watching those two battles half a year ago, the ‘bloodthirsty’ nature of the Dragonblood in Linley’s veins had been in full sway.

“I am both a warrior of the first rank and a magus of the first rank, but in terms of attack power, my magic is stronger.” Grabbing the wild rabbit, Linley couldn’t help but laugh and sigh.

Magi were divided into nine ranks, and becoming a magus of the first rank was easy. But later on, it would become much harder, and take more time to attain each new rank! Many powerful magi of the seventh or eighth ranks would spend hundreds of years and still find it hard to attain a higher rank.

But for the first rank, half a year would be enough for someone talented. Even if one didn’t have much talent, as long as they met the basic requirements for becoming a magus, two to three years would be sufficient for them to become a magus.

The rabbit in his clutches, Linley immediately began running down the mountain.

“Linley, why aren’t you cooking it? Although the Shadowmouse will eat raw meat, his favorite is cooked meat.” Doehring Cowart’s voice sounded in Linley’s mind.

“Grandpa Doehring, I bet you never coaxed any kids before.” While running, Linley replied in a teasing voice.

Doehring Cowart was startled. He had never had any grandchildren, and why would a revered Saint-level Grand Magus like himself stoop to coaxing other kids?

“Um, no, I haven’t.” Doehring Cowart was forced to admit.

Linley self-confidently said, “I often have to coax little Wharton. Lemme tell ya, if you want to give a kid something, you can’t give them something too good, right off the bat. Otherwise, in the future, they’ll expect something really good every single time, or something even better. Right now, the Shadowmouse is chewing on rocks. If I give him some raw meat, he’ll be really happy. I’ll give him raw meat for seven or eight days, and then I’ll give him cooked meat. That will make him even happier.”

Doehring Cowart immediately understood.

The older one got, the craftier one got. How could he fail to understand this logic? It was the same method he had used in dealing with subordinates. First, giving them

just a little taste, and then giving them more later. If you gave them too much too early, it would be hard to satisfy their urges in the future.

“I read about this as well in a book regarding raising monkeys. ‘Saying three in the morning and then raising to four in the afternoon’ is much more effective than ‘saying four in the morning and then lowering to three in the afternoon’. Linley grinned.

Doehring Cowart suddenly felt that although Linley was only eight, he wasn’t any inferior to many young adults.

“Looks like the educational methods of the Baruch clan are rather effective after all.” Doehring Cowart silently sighed with praise. Education can raise a person’s intelligence, but most commoners didn’t have access to education. Most commoners could not meet either the entry requirements or the fee requirements for good magus academies or warrior academies.

.....

None of the people of Mt. Wushan found it strange for Linley to be running home with a wild hare in hand. In truth, ever since Linley had learned the ‘Earth Spike’ spell, he often brought wild hares home.

“Young master Linley is so formidable. He caught another wild hare.” The commoners in the town grinned as they watched him pass by.

Linley also politely smiled back at them as he walked past them on the street.

“I wonder if the Shadowmouse will eat something which is provided by another.”

Taking a deep breath, Linley entered his family’s manor and went to the back courtyard, and one careful step at a time, approached the location where the Shadowmouse had appeared, his footsteps not making a single sound. In a short period of time, Linley returned to his earlier position.

“Where’s the Shadowmouse?” Linley stared at the ancient building, but aside from some rubble and rotting leaves, he didn’t see anything.

Some of the stones still showed signs of being chewed on, but despite scanning inside the entire building, he couldn’t see even the shadow of the Shadowmouse. Linley couldn’t help but feel despondent and miserable. “Grandpa Doehring, the Shadowmouse isn’t here anymore. It was just an hour. Did it leave already?”

A ray of light shot out of the Coiling Dragon Ring and transformed into the white-robed Doehring Cowart.

Doehring Cowart also frowned in confusion. "That shouldn't be the case. It was just an hour. Did it really leave already?"

Suddenly!

"Crunch, crunch." That familiar, soft crunching sound could be heard once again. Linley's eyes brightened, and he immediately turned and headed towards an ancient courtyard nearby. Arriving at the entryway, he clearly saw the black Shadowmouse chewing on stones in one spot, unmoving. He seemed almost like a sculptor, as he chewed each rock into surprising, bizarre shapes.

Linley stood at the doorway.

Tap! Linley purposefully let his foot bang into the doorway and make some sound.

"Eek!"

The black Shadowmouse immediately moved and in the blink of an eye, appeared over ten meters away. His two guileless eyes stared towards the doorway, and he immediately saw Linley. His eyes were filled with caution.

"Here, this is for you to eat."

Linley smiled at the Shadowmouse, then tossed the wild hare in front of the doorway. Perhaps the Shadowmouse couldn't understand human speech, but Linley understood that an intelligent magical beast should be able to understand the meaning of a smile.

After all, magical beasts weren't like wild beasts. Their intelligence levels were only slightly lower than humans, and some powerful magical beasts were incredibly crafty.

"Don't rush it, don't rush it." Linley kept on telling himself, and then forced himself to slowly walk away.

The Shadowmouse saw Linley depart, and then looked at the wild hare. He only managed to resist for a short period of time, then he scurried like a flash to the doorway while still staring at the now-distant Linley. Only then did he look at the dead hare. The Shadowmouse immediately grew ecstatic and was so happy that he began to hop about.

"Squeak, squeak!" The Shadowmouse began to make a happy sound.

And then he immediately began to eat the wild hare. His sharp teeth chewed at an incredibly fast rate. Although the Shadowmouse had a small body, this wild hare which was physically larger than the Shadowmouse was fully devoured by it, aside from the fur. Even the bones weren't spared.

"Buuuurp!" The little Shadowmouse made a belching noise, and then, in a very human-like gesture, rubbed its belly, extremely content.

Compared to stones, raw meat clearly was a much tastier treat.

After finishing his meal, the Shadowmouse glanced again in the direction which Linley had departed to. The baby Shadowmouse immediately felt a degree of kinship for this young fellow. After all, he was just recently born, an infant magical beast. The baby Shadowmouse even felt a bit of anticipation. Would this young man return in the future with another wild hare?

That same day, before dinner.

"Wonder if the little Shadowmouse ate it or not." Linley was currently in the back courtyard of the manor, and walked towards the area where he had tossed the wild hare earlier.

"Linley, don't worry. That's just a baby magical beast. It's always very hungry." Doehring Cowart's laughter echoed merrily in Linley's mind.

Linley nodded slightly. He quickly arrived at the doorway, and saw that at the doorway, there was some rabbit fur splattered with blood. But the rabbit's flesh and bones were all gone. Seeing this, Linley's eyes immediately shone.

"Wonderful!" Linley clenched a fist.

The first step was a success. The only thing left to do was to persevere!

The next afternoon, Linley killed another wild hare as well as a wild chicken. He gave the wild hare to Uncle Hiri to prepare for dinner, and then tossed the wild chicken in the exact same location as he had tossed the hare; at the doorway to that courtyard.

"The Shadowmouse is actually here staring at me." Linley chuckled as he saw that Shadowmouse inside the courtyard watch him approach.

“Linley, looks like things are progressing smoothly. He didn’t run away immediately upon seeing you, which means that he doesn’t feel much hostility towards you.” Upon seeing this, Doebling Cowart secretly felt joy for Linley. Linley really was lucky to have met such a powerful juvenile magical beast.

“I really wonder what this young fella’s parents are up to.” Doebling Cowart was secretly suspicious.

After placing the wild chicken at the doorway, he said a few words to the young Shadowmouse, smiled, and then retreated. But this time, he didn’t depart, just standing off to the side and watched. Shortly afterwards, the young Shadowmouse scampered out. Looking around himself, when he saw Linley’s far off presence, he wasn’t too scared. He immediately lowered his head and began to eat the chicken.

....

Day three. Day four. Day five.

These activities continued. Day after day, Linley continued to undergo meditative training while preparing wild rabbits and other animals for the little Shadowmouse to eat. Nobody in the entire Wushan township, including Hogg and Hillman, knew that Linley was learning magic. Similarly, none of them knew that Linley was taking care of a juvenile magical beast that already possessed power of the fourth rank!

Only Doebling Cowart was aware of this all, as he watched Linley mature.

“There’s no way that tiny little Wushan township is big enough for Linley.” Watching Linley enter the meditative trance to practice magic, Doebling Cowart felt a hint of excitement. “Sooner or later, he will bring an adult Violet Shadowmouse and step onto the endlessly broad stage that is the world of the Yulan continent.”

Chapter 4 – The Ernst Institute

As time passed, the little Shadowmouse, which had not known much love from others, began to fear Linley less and less. By the eighth day, when Linley put down the rabbit, he moved away only two steps, and that little Shadowmouse still immediately ran over to eat, and even squeaked twice at Linley.

The tenth day!

"Right, today I'll give the little Shadowmouse some cooked meat." Linley covered a wild chicken with a cloth sack, and then happily went to the back of the ancient courtyard in the manor.

Doehring Cowart was walking by Linley's side as well, but aside from Linley, no one else could see him. Doehring Cowart was smiling so widely that his white whiskers were leaning horizontal. "Linley, over these past nine days, the little Shadowmouse has lost all fear of you. Today, you are even giving him cooked meat. He's going to be extremely excited and will become even closer to you."

Hearing his words, Linley couldn't help but grin as well.

Just as Linley walked into the courtyard....

"Squeak, squeak!" The little Shadowmouse immediately ran up to Linley, and began hopping up and down while squeaking at him.

"I haven't even taken the food out, and he's already run up to me. He really isn't afraid of me at all." Linley felt joy in his heart.

Next to him, Doehring Cowart smiled merrily at the little Shadowmouse, which didn't notice his presence at all. Doehring Cowart said with a smile, "Looks like he's already feeling quite close to you."

"Squeaaaaak!" The little Shadowmouse looked at Linley with its innocent black eyes and began to squeak with impatience, as though telling Linley to hurry up and give him the food already.

"Don't be impatient." Linley took the roasted chicken out of the clothsack.

Upon smelling the roasted chicken, the little Shadowmouse's eyes shone, and then it looked at Linley pitifully. Seeing this, Linley couldn't help but laugh until his stomach hurt. In the past, when Linley gave good food to little Wharton, little Wharton would say, "Big bro, I want!" while staring at him in a pitiful manner.

Now this little Shadowmouse was doing the same!

"Hehe, all yours!" Linley gave the cooked chicken to the Shadowmouse.

The little Shadowmouse squeaked with joy, immediately seizing the roast chicken. After taking a single bite, the little Shadowmouse began to eat faster and faster. In a very short time, the roast chicken, which was about the same size as the Shadowmouse itself, had been completely devoured.

"I really don't get how his stomach can contain so much. How can he swallow that much food?" Linley laughed while sighing.

It seemed as though this time, the little Shadowmouse had enjoyed his meal very much. He was so happy that he immediately began to hop up and down while squeaking at Linley, while even hugging Linley's leg with his own front arms. Linley couldn't help but feel pleased; this was the first time that the little Shadowmouse had acted so intimately towards him, even after eating.

"Linley, try and use your hand to smooth his fur. Usually, most magical beasts like their family members to groom them and stroke their fur." Doehring Cowart advised.

Linley tentatively stretched his hand out and placed it on the little Shadowmouse's head. The little Shadowmouse didn't dodge in the slightest. Instead, it contentedly half-closed its eyes. Linley immediately felt more confident, and began to stroke his fur, causing the Shadowmouse to feel so comfortable that it began to snore.

"This little guy is so adorable." Linley was really beginning to like this little Shadowmouse more and more.

"Grandpa Doehring, magical beasts are so strange. That Velocidragon is so huge and has such tough scales, making it a magical beast of the seventh rank. But this little Shadowmouse, when he grows up, will also become a magical beast of the seventh rank. Both of them have the same rank, but why is there such a big difference between them?"

While petting the little Shadowmouse, Linley couldn't help but feel amazed.

"You can't judge them just based on their appearances. Perhaps an ordinary old geezer that you meet on the street is able to ride a flying dragon and level a mountain with the wave of a hand." Doehring Cowart laughed merrily.

Linley understood this logic.

But unconsciously, he still used appearances to judge.

For example, that Velocidragon. Seeing how huge body was and seeing how its scales gleamed with a frozen golden light, anyone could tell how powerful it was.

"I really wonder when this little Shadowmouse will initiate a 'bond of equals' with me." Linley mumbled. There was nothing he could do. The 'bond of equals' could only be initiated by magical beasts, so he could only passively wait.

Doehring Cowart laughed. "Things are progressing very well. Remember. You must have patience."

"Right. I got it." Linley laughed as well.

.....

In the blink of an eye, time passed. Linley had fed the little Shadowmouse for twenty days now, and the little Shadowmouse was behaving extremely familiarly with Linley. But for some reason, even though the two of them had become extremely close, the little Shadowmouse still had not initiated the 'bond of equals'.

Darkness covered the land, and the entire Wushan township was very quiet.

Within the Baruch clan's living room, candlelight flickered from within as Linley and his family, along with Housekeeper Hiri, were enjoying supper together on the long dining table.

"Linley, I hear that you've often been bringing roasted hares to the back courtyards?" Halfway through the meal, Hogg put down his utensils and turned to Linley.

Linley was startled.

"Looks like it is time for me to confess." Linley said to himself, then looked at Hogg and nodded. "Father, recently I discovered a cute animal living in our back courtyard, an extremely cute animal. So I often bring him some food."

"A cute animal?" Little Wharton's eyes shone.

"Oh."

Hogg nodded. "People rarely visit the back courtyard, so its normal for there to be animals there. Right. In a week or so, the Fenlai City is going to begin another round of magical aptitude testing and magus recruitment. Do you want to participate?"

"Oh, the magus testing and recruiting event?" Linley suddenly remembered this event.

The ray of light which only Linley could see shot out from within the Coiling Dragon Ring, turning into the white-bearded Doehring Cowart. Doehring Cowart laughed at Linley, "Linley, the magus testing and recruiting event is optional for you. Under my guidance, will you achieve less than at a magus academy?"

Linley agreed with this line of thought.

Doehring Cowart was a Saint-level Grand Magus. Would any magus academies require a Saint-level Grand Magus to teach there?

“What, you don’t want to go?” Hogg’s face, previously smiling, immediately grew cold as he frowned.

Hogg remembered clearly that ever since the battle between the dual-element magus of the eighth rank and the small party, Linley had very much wanted to become a magus. Why was he hesitating now? In Hogg’s heart, he too hoped that his son could become a magus.

“Father, I...”

“No, Linley, accept your father’s offer.” Doehring Cowart frowned and hurriedly said.

Linley’s words died unspoken on his lips. At the same time, he suspiciously asked, “Grandpa Doehring, I have you to teach me, right? With you teaching me, why would I need to go to a magus academy? Isn’t that a waste of family resources?”

“No.” Doehring Cowart said seriously. “I haven’t interacted with the Yulan continent for over five thousand years. Five thousand years, Linley! You must understand that many magi in the world have been continuously researching and developing new spells during this time period. Who knows how many new spells have been developed in the interim.”

Linley suddenly understood.

“And Linley, you must know that Wushan township is not the stage on which you will perform. You must step onto a far wider stage.” Doehring Cowart said seriously.

“A far wider stage...”

Linley couldn’t help but be moved.

He couldn’t help but remember that huge Velocidragon, and the destructive power unleashed by the ‘Dance of the Fire Serpents’, as well as the Saint-level Grand Magus ‘Rudi’, who effortlessly controlled those countless boulders to cause an absolute calamity.

“The future...”

Linley’s heart began to beat faster. If he could one day step atop the head of a dragon and control cataclysmic power, if he too could feel the power of standing at the very

pinnacle of mankind, that must be an amazing feeling. When he thought of this, Linley felt his blood begin to boil.

“Linley, what are you thinking about?” Hogg was beginning to grow unhappy. When he was talking to Linley, Linley was daydreaming.

“Oh, nothing!” Linley immediately looked at Hogg and quickly nodded while saying solemnly, “Father, in my heart, I really want to become a magus. In a week, please arrange for me to go to Fenlai City to take part in the magus testing and recruiting event.”

Upon hearing these words, Hogg finally smiled.

“Magus, ooo, ooo, like that fire-breathing magus?” While listening, little Wharton clapped his little hands together.

“Wharton, that was just a circus trick! Don’t mix up circus tricks and real sorcery.” Hogg said seriously.

“Oh.” Little Wharton pouted and stopped talking.

Linley chuckled, then turned to look at Hogg. “Father, there must be many magus academies. Which ones are good? Right, are there any combined magus academy/warrior academy schools?”

Hogg laughed as well. “Actually, all four of the major empires and both the major alliances have their own elite academies. You should know that one of the four major empires, the O’Brien Empire, is the empire with the strongest military power.”

Linley nodded. Everyone knew that.

“The most elite school in the O’Brien Empire is the O’Brien Academy, which is reputed to be the number one warrior academy in the entire Yulan continent. But as far as magus academies go...” Hogg chuckled. “The number one magus academy in the entire Yulan continent belongs to our Holy Union. Its name comes from a legendary Holy Emperor of the Holy Church, ‘Holy Emperor Ernst’. The ‘Ernst Institute’.”

Chapter 5 – ‘Bebe’ the Shadowmouse (part 1)

“The Ernst Institute is the number one magus academy in the world. All of the graduates of the Ernst Institute are at least magi of the sixth rank, and there’s even

many who are of the seventh rank! If our Baruch clan was able to produce a magus of the seventh rank, we at least would stand a chance of recovering our ancestral heirloom."

While speaking, Hogg looked at Linley eagerly.

Linley could feel the hope which Hogg was placing on him.

"Our ancestral heirloom. For our ancestral heirloom to be lost to us is a humiliation that must be washed away." Linley could also feel his heart grow heavy.

As a scion of the ancient Dragonblood Warrior clan, he felt proud of his ancient and mighty lineage. But the mighty Dragonblood Warrior clan had lost its own ancestral heirloom. What a humiliation! Hogg and countless elders who had passed away had all felt ashamed whenever they thought about it.

Unfortunately, the type of family which could collect the warblade 'Slaughterer' was not an ordinary one, and the current Baruch clan was far too weak.

"Ernst? The legendary Holy Emperor of the Radiant Church?" The nearby Doebling Cowart started.

"What is it, Grandpa Doebling?" Linley asked questioningly. "I bet all of the hundreds of millions of citizens in the six kingdoms and fifteen dukedoms of the Holy Union know about the legendary Holy Emperor Ernst of the Radiant Church." Linley, also, knew much about the affairs and history of the legendary Holy Emperor Ernst.

He had dramatically raised the profile of the Radiant Church, and single-handedly created the Holy Union.

"I didn't imagine that kid, Ernst, ended up having such accomplishments. And he even became a legendary Holy Emperor of the Radiant Church!" Doebling Cowart sighed.

"Grandpa Doebling, you knew Holy Emperor Ernst?" Linley was somewhat surprised.

But then, Linley thought things through.

That's right. In the past, when the Pouant Empire was still unified, the Radiant Church, the Cult of Shadows, and even the Pavilion of Divinities all had many churches within the empire. But all of those churches were under the control of the Pouant Empire.

“Naturally. Ernst was a genius who entered the Saint-level when he was merely fifty or so years old. But in my age, he could only be considered a promising latecomer.” Doehring Cowart said calmly.

When Doehring Cowart was still alive, Ernst had still been developing himself. When Ernst had finally entered the Saint-level, Doehring Cowart had already been standing at the very pinnacle of the Yulan continent for a long time. Even amongst Saint-level combatants, Doehring Cowart would have been considered one of the greatest.

Doehring Cowart had an extremely high status within the Pouant Empire, which Ernst didn’t come close to matching, at the time.

If Ernst had run into him, he would have had to courteously bow and pay his respects.

“I didn’t expect that after I died, Ernst would become so incredible.” Doehring Cowart laughed faintly.

Linley couldn’t help but feel a deep sense of veneration for Doehring Cowart from his heart. A Saint-level Grand Magus of the Pouant Empire, and one of the most powerful persons in the Yulan continent. And now, Doehring Cowart was carefully instructing himself in magic. How fortunate Linley was!

As dinner progressed, the conversation amongst the Baruch clan manors was quite cheerful.

“Linley, in a week’s time, I’ll arrange for Uncle Hillman to take you to Fenlai City and attend the magus testing and recruiting event.” Hogg smiled towards Linley.

“Yes, father.”

Linley nodded.

“Young master Linley, I’m sure that you will be able to enter the finest of magus academies.” Housekeeper Hiri chortled.

“The finest. Oh. The finest!” Little Wharton’s hands were covered in grease from eating, but still beamed as he waved his greasy hands.

Hogg smiled faintly as he said, “Becoming a magus is no easy thing. Perhaps only one in ten thousand has the talent. The requirements for entering the Ernst Institute are even higher. Only someone with an extremely high aptitude for magic will be

admitted. If Linley can become a magus, I will be very satisfied, regardless of what academy he is accepted to."

"I won't let you down, father." Linley's words were filled with confidence.

Because Linley, after all, was already a magus of the first rank.

.....

As time flowed onwards, in the blink of an eye seven days had passed.

Linley was lying on the grass near the back courtyard, while the little Shadowmouse was hopping up and down around Linley. It was squeaking nonstop, but Linley paid him no mind.

The little Shadowmouse rolled its eyes, then stood up on its hind feet and placed its front feet on top of Linley's body.

"Squeeeek." The Shadowmouse called out with displeasure.

Linley rubbed the little Shadowmouse's head. "Alright, stop making a fuss. Tomorrow, I'm going to leave home and go to the capital. After the magus recruitment event is over, I'm going to be going to a magus academy. I'm afraid we won't have many chances to meet after that."

There was no way he could bring a little Shadowmouse into a magus academy.

Not a single student in a magus academy was an ordinary one, and there were many powerful magi there as well. If they found a little Shadowmouse there, they would probably immediately subdue and tame him. Even magi of the seventh and eighth ranks were present in magus academies. Catching a little Shadowmouse wouldn't be too hard.

After all, he hadn't bonded with the little Shadowmouse yet, so anybody could subdue and tame him.

"Sniff, sniff..." Hearing Linley speak, the little Shadowmouse also began to sniff in a low tone.

"You don't even know what I'm saying," Linley shook his head helplessly.

"I don't know how much time I will have to spend in a magus academy, or how many years I will be there for. Will we ever meet again?" Linley stroked the little Shadowmouse's fur, somewhat unwilling to part from it. After playing with the little

Shadowmouse for the past month, he had really come to care for the cute little Shadowmouse.

The little Shadowmouse enjoyed the petting so much that its eyes grew half-lidded as it squeaked quietly in contentment.

.....

The next day, after lunch. The Baruch family's front courtyard.

Hogg stood there, straight as a ramrod. Staring directly at Linley, he said, "Linley, Wushan township is located fairly close to the capital, just ninety or so kilometers away. You should be able to make it to the capital before nightfall. Remember, when you reach the capital, don't cause any trouble. There are too many rich and powerful people in the capital."

"Yes, father." Linley bowed as he said.

"Hillman, I entrust Linley to you." Hogg looked at the nearby Hillman.

Hillman smiled as he said, "Lord Hogg, please set your mind at ease."

"Alright, you can go now." Hogg laughed.

"Farewell, father." Linley said respectfully, and then smiled at little Wharton.

"Wharton, your big brother is gonna leave now."

Little Wharton immediately squinted towards Linley. In a sad voice, he said, "Big brother, bye bye!"

Linley glanced at the back courtyard, thinking to himself, "I'm afraid no one is going to come bring meat to the little Shadowmouse in the next few days." Hillman, who was next to him, said to Linley, "Linley, let's go!"

"Yes, Uncle Hillman."

Linley didn't think about it anymore, and immediately followed Uncle Hillman as they departed from the manor.

"Squeak." On the rooftops above the living room of the Baruch clan manor, the little Shadowmouse watched Linley and Hillman depart. The little Shadowmouse's mind was filled with questions. In his eyes, this was the time when Linley should be going off to kill a wild hare. Why had he taken up a bag and headed off with someone else?

The little Shadowmouse really liked Linley.

Over the past month, the friendless little Shadowmouse had really come to view Linley as family.

“Squeak!”

The little Shadowmouse’s body flickered and in the blink of an eye, disappeared from atop the eaves of the Baruch clan’s manor. In two or three movements, it moved, reappearing on top of a nearby peasant’s house, still watching Linley and Hillman. As it followed behind Linley, the little Shadowmouse soon had left Wushan township.

Chapter 6 – ‘Bebe’ the Shadowmouse (part 2)

The little Shadowmouse had previously watched Linley go hunting rabbits in the mountain, but this time, Linley wasn’t headed for the mountain. He was headed off in a totally different direction, traveling on a road. The little Shadowmouse immediately panicked.

“Squeak, squeak!”

The little Shadowmouse suddenly rushed in Linley’s direction.

Just as Linley was walking, he suddenly discovered that his legs had been hugged from behind. Lowering his head, he saw that it was the little Shadowmouse. The little Shadowmouse was standing up on his hind legs, his two forelegs tightly clenched around Linley. He stared at Linley with two quavering, pitiable eyes, as though he were about to cry.

“Uh, what’s the little Shadowmouse doing here?!” Linley was somewhat surprised.

Next to them, Hillman turned his head towards them. Upon seeing the little Shadowmouse, he was shocked. “A magical beast! Is it a Stoneater Rat?” Hillman didn’t know too much about the various types of magical beasts, but there once was an entire army which had been devoured by Stoneater Rats, so most soldiers knew and feared rat-type magical beasts.

“Linley, be careful!” Hillman immediately rushed towards them. Linley only saw a blur, and then Hillman was there, right next to the little Shadowmouse.

But the little Shadowmouse was even faster, and in the blink of an eye, scurried on top of Linley's shoulder.

"Uncle Hillman, hold it!" Linley finally managed to react.

Hillman was startled.

"Uncle Hillman, he's the pet that I've been feeding and raising in the back courtyard." Linley hurriedly said. "Little Shadowmouse, isn't that right?"

The little Shadowmouse seemed to understand Linley's words, and his small head nodded.

Hillman looked at Linley with shock. "Linley, are you saying that you've been raising, raising a magical beast?"

"Uncle Hillman, wait a sec. Lemme tell him to go home." Linley cupped the little Shadowmouse in his hands and said to it, "Little Shadowmouse, I am going to leave with Uncle Hillman to the capital. You cannot go to the capital. Understood?"

The little Shadowmouse just stared at Linley with pitiable sad eyes, as though he were about to cry

Linley placed the little Shadowmouse on the floor, then waved his hand at it. "Go back." And then he pointed to the road. "I'm going that way. To the capital."

After waving his arm, Linley began to continue going forward.

"Squeak. Squeaaaaak!" The little Shadowmouse stood there, watching Linley.

"Uncle Hillman, let's go. Hehe, the little Shadowmouse is smart. He knows what I'm saying." Linley said to Hillman. Hillman, who had been watching this spectacle with amazement, chuckled and then continued walking forward with Linley.

Seeing Linley and Hillman slowly disappear, the little Shadowmouse still stayed there, unmoving.

"Squeak squeak...."

The little Shadowmouse suddenly gave out a loud squeak, and then turned into a black blur, traveling twenty or thirty meters in the blink of an eye. His speed was absolutely shocking, as was his agility. Linley and Hillman were chatting while walking on the road, but Hillman suddenly felt something was quickly charging them from behind and couldn't help but look back.

“Whoooosh!”

Hillman wasn’t even given enough time to react. That blur suddenly landed next to Linley’s legs, and immediately chomped down on Linley’s right leg.

“OW!” Feeling the sudden, fierce pain, Linley immediately jumped up in the air.

Looking down, he saw that it was actually the little Shadowmouse. At the moment, the little Shadowmouse was staring up at Linley with its pitiable, sad little eyes. Linley rubbed his leg, and noticed that he was actually bleeding. He couldn’t help but grow unhappy. But seeing how sad the little Shadowmouse was, he couldn’t grow angry at him.

“Linley, are you okay?” Hillman said.

“I’m fine,” Linley chuckled.

Suddenly –

A thick, dense black light began to emanate from the little Shadowmouse’s body. A droplet of fresh blood suddenly flew out from the corner of its mouth. That droplet of fresh blood had both Linley’s blood as well as the little Shadowmouse’s blood. That blood suddenly, bizarrely transformed into two opposite, interlocking black triangles, which the thick black light merged with, forming a strange magical formation which gave off a dark aura.

Linley and Hillman watched, stunned.

“Is this..can this be?” Linley had a wild guess in his heart.

From within the Coiling Dragon Ring, Doehring Cowart flew out. His white beard fluttering happily, he said, “Linley, the little guy is setting up a ‘bond of equals’ formation.”

“It really is the ‘bond of equals’?” Linley’s heart clenched. Even though he had guessed as much, he still felt stunned and excited.

The strange black magical formation separated into two, with one of the three black triangles flying into Linley’s body, and the other one flying into the little Shadowmouse’s body. Upon seeing this, the nearby Hillman was filled with shock and fear.

“Linley, are you okay?” Hillman was starting to fear for Linley.

"I'm fine. I'm wonderful!" Linley could feel his spirit and the little Shadowmouse's spirit interlinking.

Standing on this quiet road leading out of Wushan township, Linley and the little Shadowmouse stared at each other, engaging in their first communication.

"Little Shadowmouse, what is your name?" Linley mentally asked him.

The little Shadowmouse said, somewhat excitedly, "Bei....bei...."

Linley stared at the little Shadowmouse.

"What's the little Shadowmouse saying?" Linley didn't really understand.

His white beard flowing, Doehring Cowart floated next to him and mentally said, "Linley, this little Shadowmouse is still an infant. He can't form precise sounds yet. Even when engaging in mental communication with you, for now, he can only communicate simple intentions."

Due to their spiritual link, Linley could feel the little Shadowmouse's excitement, but the little Shadowmouse simply couldn't speak at all.

"Okay. You were saying 'Bei'....'Bei'....then I'm going to call you 'Bebe'. How's that?" Linley grinned as he watched the little Shadowmouse.

The little Shadowmouse seemed to ponder for a while, and then happily nodded.

"Bebe." Linley was grinning so widely, his face was about to split.

"Squeak squeak." The little Shadowmouse immediately began to jump up and down.

"Bebe!"

"Squeak squeak."

"Bebe!"

"Squeak squeak."

....

An eight year old child and a little Shadowmouse were both excitedly shouting.

“Linley, this...what...what is this?” Only now did Hillman recover from his stupor. His eyes couldn’t help but grow round with shock. “Linley, what was that black magical formation just now? What just happened? Are you okay?”

Hillman had heard that for darkness-style magic, there were many curses and hexes involved.

Could it be that Linley had just been hexed?

Hillman, who only knew an inkling about magic, couldn’t help but feel shock and fear.

“Haha, I’m fine. It’s just that Bebe has become my magical beast, now.” Linley was extremely happy. “Come, Bebe, hop onto my shoulder.” Immediately, the little Shadowmouse let out a happy squeal, then scurried onto Linley’s shoulder.

“You...tamed him?” Hillman was stunned.

Hillman was a worldly man, and of course he knew that taming a magical beast was an extremely difficult, extremely arduous matter. But just now, Linley had actually subdued a magical beast.

Hillman felt totally bewildered. “You...you don’t have a soul-binding scroll, how...how did you?”

“That’s enough, Uncle Hillman,” Linley chortled. “Let’s hurry, we have a lot of road to make up. The capital is still really far away.” As he spoke, Linley pulled Hillman by the hand, not allowing him to speak as they continued heading towards the capital.

And the little Shadowmouse, ‘Bebe’, stood happily on Linley’s shoulders and squeaked.

And with his squeaks to accompany them, Linley, Hillman, and the Shadowmouse disappeared off into the distance.

Chapter 7 – Fenlai City

Next to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts was the Holy Union and the Dark Alliance. And the capital kingdom of the Holy Union was the kingdom of Fenlai!

Fenlai City, in turn, was the capital of the kingdom of Fenlai.

In addition, it also served as the 'Holy Capital' of the Holy Union, because the Radiant Church itself was headquartered in the western part of Fenlai City.

The entire city of Fenlai was divided into two parts; East Fenlai City, and West Fenlai City. East Fenlai City was governed by the King of Fenlai, while West Fenlai City was managed by the Radiant Church. Because Fenlai City was both the kingdom's capital as well as the Holy Capital, the opulence of Fenlai City could be matched by extremely few cities in the entire Yulan continent.

Fenlai City took up a huge amount of space, and had more than a million denizens living within its area. In the entire Yulan continent, it could be considered one of the top five megacities.

As nightfall came, Linley and Hillman entered the Fenlai City.

"Wow."

As they walked on Fragrant Pavilion Road, the primary road of East Fenlai City, Linley felt as though his eyes were dazzled. The little Shadowmouse Bebe had been instructed by Linley to hide within his clothes, but he also took a sneak peek at the surroundings, and then began to squeak in shared excitement.

Fortunately, the entire road was filled with all sorts of noises and gaudy things, so nobody noticed the sound.

"Quiet!" Linley gently tapped the little Shadowmouse, which obediently went silent. But through its shared mental connection with Linley, it continued to express its excitement.

The entire Fragrant Pavilion Road was constructed from symmetrical limestone tiles, wide enough to allow multiple horse carriages to cross simultaneously. On each side of the tiles were hotels, clothing stores, weapon stores, nightclubs, and all sorts of other places. In addition, both sides of the Fragrant Pavilion Road were lined with pine and cypress trees.

Rich madames and young ladies, all wearing fashionable new clothes, were chatting and smiling as they walked along the road.

Seeing Linley's reaction, some of the nearby noble ladies began to titter quietly amongst themselves while pointing at Linley. Clearly, Linley's reaction was that of a 'country bumpkin entering the city'. The nobility of the capital had a clear sense of innate superiority towards those country bumpkins.

"Hmph. How uncultured." Linley frowned, feeling very unsatisfied by the pointing and laughing of those noble ladies.

Having been nurtured and educated by the clan since his earliest days, Linley quickly managed to subdue his sense of excitement, making the expression on his face much more tranquil, at least superficially.

"Linley, how do you feel about Fenlai City? This is the largest city in our entire Holy Union." Hillman walked alongside Linley, occasionally seeing some warriors and even one or two magi pass by. He couldn't help but sigh, "Linley, in Fenlai City, mighty warriors and mighty magi are a very common sight."

Linley laughed while nodding. "In the books, it is said that Fenlai City is the political, economic, and cultural capital of the entire Holy Union."

"This is heaven for rich people or people with status." Hillman nodded and sighed.

The Fragrant Pavilion Road, bustling with activity, often had many opulent carriages pass through it. After wandering the Fragrant Pavilion Road for a time, Hillman and Linley headed directly for an ordinary guesthouse to settle down.

There was a small restaurant near the guesthouse, so Linley and Hillman decided to have dinner there.

That night, within the guesthouse.

Linley and Hillman were staying in the same room. There were two beds in this room. Immediately upon entering, the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, leapt out from within Linley's clothes and immediately began circling around Linley while squeaking loudly.

"I know, I know, you're hungry. Eat up." Linley threw the roast duck he had brought back from the restaurant onto the floor, and Bebe immediately excitedly ran to it and began chewing.

"Linley, get an early night's rest. Tomorrow morning, you will participate in the magus assessment and recruitment event." Hillman instructed.

"Understood, Uncle Hillman." Even as he spoke, Linley walked to a nearby window and pulled it open.

The guesthouse was three stories tall, and Linley was staying on the third floor. There were no three story high buildings in Wushan township at all, but in the

capital city of Fenlai, they were a common sight. The capital even had seven or eight story tall buildings.

Peering out through the window, Linley saw that the streets were still filled with people.

"Whew. It's been quite a while since I've been in a large city." A hazy white light shone out from the Coiling Dragon Ring, transforming into a white-bearded old man. Doehring Cowart and Linley stood side by side as they stared at the street below.

"Grandpa Doehring." Linley immediately greeted him.

"Linley, how does it feel to be in a big city?" Doehring Cowart laughed as he spoke.

"No big deal." Linley quirked his mouth.

Doehring Cowart sighed emotionally, "You haven't been here very long. You don't know much about how large cities like this work. This place will have countless lavish places to spend money, like large auctions, where some magnates would spend even hundreds of thousands of gold coins, or perhaps even millions of gold coins to purchase just a single item."

"A million gold coins?" Linley felt his throat go dry.

How enormous a sum was that? His own family's possessions, all added together, probably wouldn't even total a million gold coins.

"There's many rich families here. Money, power, beauties...the fight for these things is fierce. Every day, someone dies here. The poor ditch-diggers of Fenlai City will often find buried bodies, which perhaps used to belong to a noble family."

Doehring Cowart chuckled calmly. "But in order to stand up in that sort of world, you must have some sort of personal power."

"Don't hope to be able to rely on the benevolence of others. Everything will rely on yourself, and yourself alone." Doehring Cowart looked at Linley.

In truth, the Dragonblood flowing through Linley's veins also made him thirst for battle and blood.

"If anyone threatens me or my family, I will kill them." Linley said resolutely. After having read many history books about the rise and fall of noble families, Linley knew very clearly that showing mercy to enemies was the same as being merciless to oneself.

If you let an enemy off the hook, they might one day murder your family.

“However, right now my power is very weak.” Linley couldn’t help but recollect how, when he had first entered Fenlai City, those noble ladies had looked down upon him. In the eyes of those upper class people, he was nothing more than an impoverished little country bumpkin.

With a calm smile, Linley sat down on the bed and entered the meditative trance, beginning to gather energy.

The meditative trance was a good way to train one’s spiritual energy. The way it worked was, it used all sorts of methods to exhaust one’s spiritual energy to a bare minimum, and then allow rest to recover it!

Within the dantian in the chest...

A misty earth-colored haze billowed about within the dantian. This misty haze was the mageforce which had been derived from natural earth elemental essence. Based on Doehring Cowart’s teachings, from the first to sixth ranks, mageforce appeared as a haze. As a magus continued to progress, the quality of the mageforce would rise, and so too would its density.

Upon reaching the seventh rank, the mageforce of a magus would condense into a liquid.

Thus, between the sixth rank and the seventh rank, there was a major leap to be made!

“This kid, Linley, is so hard working. Even at night, he is training his mental energy.” Seeing Linley seated cross-legged with his eyes closed, Hillman couldn’t help but silently praise him. Mental energy was extremely important to both magi and warriors!

.....

Early next morning, on East Fenlai City’s Greenleaf Road. One of Fenlai City’s principal roads, the buildings constructed on each side of Greenleaf Road were lavishly made and decorated. Some of those buildings were actually owned by the kingdom. And the tallest building of them all? It was the Cathedral of the Radiant Church.

The Radiant Church controlled the entire Holy Union, which comprised of the six kingdoms and the fifteen dukedoms.

The Holy Emperor of the Radiant Church had an extremely high status. He had the authority to depose any of the kings of the various kingdoms! This is why in Fenlai City, the tallest building was the Cathedral of the Radiant Church.

This morning, many people were gathered around the entrance to the Cathedral of the Radiant Church. The vast majority of the people there were richly dressed noblemen. Countless carriages filled up the space in front of the Radiant Cathedral, and the various nobles chatted to each other.

Linley and Hillman had arrived here as well.

“Uncle Hillman, there’s so many people here today. Many nobles brought their children here.” Linley laughed towards Hillman. At this time, the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, was hiding within Linley’s clothes, occasionally peeking out to see his surroundings.

Hillman laughed calmly, “Nobles? Every single student of the Ernst Institute can easily become an earl in any kingdom.”

“An earl in any kingdom?” Linley immediately understood.

It wasn’t hard to be conferred a noble title in any kingdom, but to become an imperial noble would be extremely difficult. After all, any of the four great empires were a match for the entire Holy Union. The kingdom of Fenlai couldn’t come close to comparing to them.

“Oh, Lord Doyle [Dao’er], you came as well?”

“Eber [Xi’bo], I’m here because of my child, of course. Hess [He’si], come pay your respects to Uncle Eber.”

Not too far away, a group of nobles were chatting amongst themselves. The testing fee alone at this magus testing and recruiting event was ten gold coins. And if a student was accepted to a magus academy, then the school fees would be even higher. Most magus academies charged hundreds of gold coins each year! Ordinary families simply couldn’t afford the fees. But if their children were selected, naturally they would be able to find a noble patron to pay for them.

However, not all magus academies had expensive tuition fees.

For example, the number one magus academy, the Ernst Institute. Because it admitted so few students, any students who hailed from the Holy Union did not have to pay any fees at all! After all, everyone who could be admitted to the Ernst Institute had to be genius-level. In the future, their possibilities were limitless.

“Hmph. Those commoners and country bumpkins have also come. Aren’t they just dreaming?” A far-away noble laughed.

There were some commoners amongst the hundreds of people crowding the square, and some countryside nobles such as Linley. Usually, those nobles from small countryside noble families were also looked down upon. The nobles of the capital were an arrogant lot who generally looked down on people.

“Linley, don’t pay any attention to the likes of them.” Hillman said in a low voice.

Glancing at the group of nobles, Linley chuckled quietly. “Uncle Hillman, I won’t pay any mind to their likes.” Under the tutelage of his father Hogg, Linley wouldn’t pay too much heed to that group of self-centered, arrogant nobles.

The entire square was clearly delineated into two camps. A circle of nobles who conversed casually, and another with commoners or countryside nobles.

At the moment, two armor-clad warriors were standing in front of the Radiant Cathedral, barring all entry.

After a while, a black-robed official stepped forth from the cathedral doors. Stopping in front of the doors, he smiled and said in a bright voice, “The magical assessment ceremony is about to commence. All of the recruiters for the various major magus academies are ready as well. Everyone who is here for the test, please follow me into the main hall.”

Chapter 8 – The Magical Aptitude Test (part 1)

Under the guidance of the church official, all of the people in the square were walked into the main hall of the cathedral.

Within the cathedral.

The great hall of the cathedral had a floor paved with marble, and hanging above was a massive crystal chandelier. It could easily fit the hundreds of people who entered yet still feel spacious.

In the very front of the great hall, there were a line of chairs, seated upon which were representatives and recruiters of each of the great magus academies. Directly in the middle of the great hall was the testing location.

The black robed church official smiled and said in a clear voice, "The testing location is right in the center. All testees, please come one at a time. No one else can enter the circle in the center. All testees, please get in line. Family and friends, please step to one side."

"Linley, here is the examination fee. Here is your proof of identification. Go quickly. Oh, and right, let the little Shadowmouse stay with me. It will be difficult to have the little Shadowmouse with you as you take the test." Hillman said.

"Bebe, stick with Uncle Hillman for now. I'm going to take the test." Linley mentally instructed the little Shadowmouse, who somewhat unwillingly shuffled around a bit under Linley's clothes. But after multiple requests from Linley, the little Shadowmouse directly scurried into Hillman's clothes.

Linley then accepted the ten gold coins and headed towards the line. The youths there ranged in age from six or seven years old to seventeen years old. These children organized themselves into two long lines, while the cathedral pursers collected the fees from each of them.

The central circle was ten or so meters wide, and there were three adults within it. Two of them were responsible for administering the test, while one was responsible for recording the results. The testing equipment consisted of a crystal sphere and a complicated, six-sided magical formation.

"First."

The bald old man pointed at the crystal ball and said, "Place your hand atop the crystal ball. We will test your elemental essence affinities."

The first testee was a twelve or thirteen year old young man. That young man nervously placed his right hand atop the crystal ball. Immediately, the entire crystal ball began to emanate a hazy, light red glow, with the occasional hint of green mixed in.

The bald elder glanced at the scrap of paper in his hands, and emotionlessly said, "Age, twelve. Elemental essence affinities – Fire, average affinity. Wind, low affinity.

"Now, step into the magical formation. Time to test your spiritual essence. Remember, stand there. Don't kneel or fall down. Let's see how long you can take it." The bald elder remained as cold as ever. The young man nodded, then stepped into the six-cornered magical formation. A holy white aura immediately emanated from the bald elder, which shot into the middle of the magical formation.

Light-style elemental magic – Overawe!

"Looks like the testing procedures in this era is the same as it was in the past." Doehring Cowart flew out of the ring and appeared next to Linley.

"Grandpa Doehring." Seeing Doehring Cowart, Linley felt himself calm down.

"In the magical aptitude test, the elemental essence affinity test is secondary. The spiritual essence test is the main one. After half a year of meditation, your spiritual essence should be sixteen or seventeen times that of most people your age." Doehring Cowart chuckled at Linley. "For you, this test will be extremely easy."

In a short period of time, the youth in the middle of the magical formation could no longer hold on.

"Spiritual essence, two times stronger than the average person of the same age. Not qualified to become a magus." The bald elder coldly announced as the magical formation deactivated, and the youngster quietly departed.

A burst of noise from nearby.

"Silence." The bald elder coldly said, and immediately a large group of nobles no longer dared to speak. "Next."

Doehring Cowart watched with interest from the side.

One after another youngster was tested. Of the first ten, none met the requirements. Right now, there was a young lady in the magical formation, who had been able to hold out for longer than any of the ten before her.

"Hrm?" The bald elder's eyes shone, and he immediately increased the power of the magical formation.

After a long period of time, the young lady finally dropped down to one knee.

The bald elder nodded in a satisfied manner. A hint of a smile on his face, he said, "Spiritual essence, eight times stronger than most people your age. The minimum qualifications for becoming a magus have been met. You also possess average elemental essence affinity. You can become a magus!" The judgment of the bald elder had just determined the fate of this young woman.

"Oh, how wonderful!" The first person to shout with joy was not the young woman. Rather, it was the young woman's father, a bald, middle aged, gentlemanly looking person.

"Quiet!" The bald elder snapped in a cold, unhappy voice.

Immediately, the ushers came and escorted the girl and her father to where the line of magus academies recruiters sat.

Many envious eyes were cast towards the young woman.

As time went on, the people in the main hall grew more and more numerous. The magical testing event would go on for seven days, so most people didn't see the urge to come right away at the beginning. When Linley's turn came, the line of test-takers had already stretched out the main doors of the cathedral.

"Next." The bald elder said again.

Linley calmly walked into the center, with Doebling Cowart remaining by his side. In Doebling Cowart's eyes, only a Saint-level combatant could, just barely, detect his presence. These ordinary magi definitely couldn't detect him.

Linley placed his right hand on the crystal ball.

Instantly!

The crystal ball suddenly burst forth with light, as though it were the sun! Earthen rays of light intersected with green rays of light, and there were even some thin lines of red spaced in between. That eye-piercing brightness forced even the people nearby to squint their eyes.

Seeing the sun-like brightness emanating forth from the crystal globe, everyone in the great hall was stunned.

The bald elder quivered as he stared at the piece of paper in his hands. It was written clearly on top that Linley was eight years old.

"Age, eight. Elemental essence affinities – Earth and Wind, affinity level of exceptional for both! Fire affinity, average." That bald elder felt his heart thumping wildly. Most magi had average elemental essence affinity. Even high elemental essence affinities were quite rare, and as for exceptional affinity...exceptional affinity was ridiculously rare!

By way of explaining, an ordinary magus might take ten hours to produce a certain amount of mageforce, but Linley would only require a single hour to get the same result.

"Oooooooo."

The entire hall was shocked. Not only was the kid's elemental essence affinity of the exceptional level, it was for two different elements! This was simply too terrifying.

"Exceptional affinity for the wind element?" The nearby Doebling Cowart was shocked.

"Whoah, I, I have affinity for the wind-style as well?" Linley was stunned. He couldn't help but turn to look at Doebling Cowart.

Doebling Cowart squeezed out a smile. "Linley, I did tell you early on that I could only test for the earth elemental essence affinity. Right. When you absorbed natural elemental essence, did you never sense any wind essence?"

"Wind elemental essence?" Linley was stunned. "The first time you taught me to process elemental essence, you told me to not be distracted, so although I did notice some green-colored specks of light around me, I didn't pay any attention to them. But later on, when I began to absorb earth elemental essence, I would be surrounded by earth essence and the green specks would no longer appear.

Doebling Cowart now understood.

When training mageforce, especially dual-element mageforce, if one only focused on training one element such as earth, all the nearby earth elemental essence would be drawn near while all other essences, including wind, were pushed aside.

"Afterwards, whenever I trained, I only sensed earth elemental essence nearby. I didn't think about those green specks of light." Linley was feeling extremely happy as well.

Because he knew how powerful a dual-element magus was; far more powerful than a single-element magus.

After the elemental essence affinity test, the spiritual essence test!

Chapter 9- The Magical Aptitude Test (part 2)

"Remember, when engaging in the spiritual essence test, you must hold strong. Resist for as long as you can." Doebling Cowart said solemnly. "I don't know much about the wind-style, so you absolutely must go to a magus academy. With such strong elemental essence affinities, it would be an absolute waste for you not to train in the wind-style."

Linley understood this as well.

“Please enter the magical formation.” The bald elder actually used the word ‘please’ in addressing Linley.

Even the nearby nobles began to look at Linley with a new light in their eyes. For a person to have exceptional elemental affinity meant that they could generate mageforce in an extremely short period of time. The rest of the time could be spent on cultivating spiritual energy. His future prospects would therefore be unlimited.

Linley stepped into the magical formation.

The magical formation immediately glowed with a white aura, and then a sense of pressure immediately flooded into Linley’s spirit.

Light-style elemental magic – Overawe!

“How weak. Compared to the overawing presence of the Black Dragon from half a year ago, it simply isn’t even close to being on the same level.” Linley was relaxed enough to even think about that.

As time went on, the aura of the magical formation grew stronger and stronger, and the overawing presence grew stronger and stronger as well. Everyone in the great hall held their breaths, as everyone watching knew very clearly that in the future, this plainly dressed youngster would definitely become a powerful magus.

“Does anyone know that youngster? What clan does he belong to?” The nobles in front were all whispering to each other.

If they had made friends with this youngster of amazing potential, they would have acquired, in the future, an extremely formidable ally.

“His name is Linley?” Some of the magus academy recruiters learned his name from the test administrators.

The entire group of magus academy recruiters, who had previously been sitting there, smiling, all ran over enmasse to watch. Which magus academy would not want to recruit a genius such as this?

Standing alone in the magical formation, Linley continued to resist the overawing presence.

Linley was breathing heavily, and at the moment, his entire mind felt hazy. That powerful spiritual pressure was pressing down on him like a mountain, and the

strength of the pressure was continuing to rise. But Linley was continuing to persevere....

"The longer I can hold on, the better an academy I can enter." Linley gritted his teeth.

And then, when the pressure had reached a certain height, Linley finally could no longer resist. He dropped to one knee, his hands clenching into fists on the floor.

Everyone's gaze turned to the bald elder.

His face suffused with happy red glow, the bald elder announced in a clear voice, "Spiritual essence, eighteen times that of his peers, high-level. High spiritual essence, exceptional elemental affinity."

At this point in time, all of the magus recruiters charged forth. "Hello, Linley. I come from the Lander [Lan'de] Magus Academy. Our Lander Magus Academy sincerely would like to admit you into our school. As long as you enroll with us, your entire tuition will be free, and every year we will even provide you with a thousand gold coins for living expenses. We will also invite an especially skilled magus teacher to personally train you."

"Linley, I come from the Welling [We'lin] Magus Academy. We..."

.....

Seeing the swarm of people around him and how warmly they were treating him, Linley was stunned for a long moment, while in his heart, he sighed with amazement. In the blink of an eye, so many recruiters had learned his name. This was really too amazing.

"Hey, everyone, please return to your seats. We need to continue the test." The bald elder said in a kind voice.

He could be arrogant towards those common folk, but he had to be courteous to the representatives of mighty magus academies.

"Linley. Our Ernst Institute would sincerely like to invite you to become one of our students." From far away, another voice sounded out, and when it did, the entire hall went silent. Even the bald elder stopped speaking.

Linley turned around.

A white-robed middle-aged man walked over. Smiling, he said, "Exceptional elemental affinity, high spiritual essence, and dual-element. Linley, our Ernst

Institute would very much welcome you to join us. I don't know if you would be willing to enter our Ernst Institute?"

Hillman, nearby, had been staring in stunned silence. He immediately ran over next to Linley, so excited that his hands were quivering.

The Ernst Institute?

Enter the Yulan continent's number one magus academy, the Ernst Institute? What did that represent?

That represented that immediately upon graduation, even if he was just an average student, he could easily become an earl in any of the nearby kingdoms. If he was a superior student, even the four great empires would sincerely welcome him to join them.

Across the entire massive Yulan continent, each year the Ernst Institute only enrolled a scant hundred students!

A hundred students a year. What did this mean?

Every single student who enrolled into the Ernst Institute could be described as a genius!

"Linley, agree to him." Hillman excitedly said.

Linley also felt extremely excited, but his head was extremely clear, and he also looked very calm on the outside. Linley knew very well that upon becoming a member of the Ernst Institute, and with the guidance of Doehring Cowart, in just a few decades, it would not be too difficult to become a magus of the seventh or eighth ranks.

His clan would once again flourish.

"Sir, it would be my honor to enroll within the Ernst Institute." Linley said courteously.

Surprised at Linley's equanimity, the white robed man still smiled. "Linley, I will inform the Institute of your biographical details. When the time comes, just bring your proof of identity to the Institute and take a second, correlating test. Then, you will become an official student of our Institute."

It was pointless to try and get someone else to take the test for you, because each school would do a backup test as well.

“Each academic year is divided into two semesters, with the first semester beginning in February 9th. As long as you arrive by February 9th, you will be fine. This is your proof of identity. It can also be considered your proof of admission.” The white robed man withdrew a sealed red envelope from within his sleeves.

In fact, immediately upon knowing Linley’s test results, he had recorded Linley’s details into the paperwork in the envelope. Because the white robed man believed without a doubt – no one would refuse an offer from the Ernst Institute!

“Thank you.” Linley accepted the envelope.

Linley didn’t look too excited on the outside, but Hillman was uncontrollably excited. A student at the Ernst Institute. Who amongst them were not venerated? Linley’s future accomplishments could already be predicted.

“Uncle Hillman, let’s go.” Linley placed the red envelope into his clothes, and then left the main hall with Hillman.

Despite being packed, everyone in the main hall, from the commoners to the nobles, all discreetly made way for him to move through. Even those nobles who had previously scorned Linley as a country bumpkin were all now smiling at him in a friendly manner. Their attitudes were amazingly good.

This was a simple demonstration of the status which an Ernst Institute student held!

Watched by a crowd of nobles, commoners, and church officials, Linley and Hillman departed the cathedral.

“Squeaaaaak!” After exiting the cathedral, the little Shadowmouse shouted out, sensing Linley’s excitement.

Only now did Linley let the excitement he felt show on his face. His hands suddenly clenching into fists, his eyes shone with energy. Turning to look at Hillman, he rapidly said, “Uncle Hillman, let’s go, let’s go back! Back to Wushan township! I’ve gotta let my father know the news!”

Chapter 10 – The Secret Dragonblood Training Tome (part 1)

Wushan township. The Baruch clan manor.

Hogg had just finished lunch not too long ago, and was currently sitting down, relaxed, on a sofa, while leisurely reading a book.

Two shadowy blurs suddenly entered the manor. It was Linley and Hillman, who had rushed the entire way back from Fenlai City. At the moment, both their faces contained uncontrollable excitement, and Linley began to shout from far away, "Father, I've returned!"

"Lord Hogg." Hillman was very excited as well.

Hogg raised his head. Seeing the wild excitement on the faces of Linley and Hillman, he had a positive premonition. He immediately stood up. Staring at Linley and Hillman, his voice quavered as he said, "How did the magus assessment test go?"

The Baruch clan had been in a downward spiral for too long. This ancient clan needed a mighty personage to restore it to its former glories!

"Lord Hogg, the Ernst Institute! It's the Ernst Institute! Linley was accepted by the Ernst Institute!" Hillman said excitedly.

Hogg seemed to have turned into a statue. At the moment, Hogg felt as though his brain had suddenly been deprived of oxygen, as everything went blank for a moment.

"Ernst...lord? Lord?" Hillman called out twice.

Hogg, slowly regaining his mental faculties, suddenly hurried walked towards Linley and Hillman. In a disbelieving tone, he said, "Ernst, did you just say, Ernst Institute?" Right now, Hogg's eyes were bulging and round.

"Father, here's the acceptance letter from the Ernst Institute." Linley directly handed the admissions envelope to his father. Hogg was stunned for a moment, then quickly accepted the red envelope and removed the letter from within it. He carefully scanned the letter.

Several names in bright red particularly stood out – "Ernst Institute" "Linley".

"Haha, hahahahaha! Elders of the Baruch clan, there is hope for our clan again!" Hogg suddenly lifted his head to the sky and laughed wildly, so hard that his entire body was trembling, so hard that tears began to flow. "There is hope for our Baruch clan again!"

That wild laughter and those coursing tears absolutely stunned Linley.

"Father..." Linley said in a soft voice, as though afraid to disturb his father.

Linley had never seen his father act so wildly before, and his father's tears made Linley's heart quaver as well.

Housekeeper Hiri came over as well. He was also stunned by Hogg's reaction. Hiri had no idea what had just happened.

Hogg took a deep breath, then looked at Linley, his eyes filled with boundless excitement. "Good, good."

"Hillman, Uncle Hiri!" Hogg looked at the two of them. "Tonight, I am going to host a banquet. Quick, make the arrangements! Tonight, I am very happy, extremely happy. To have such a son, even if I die, I will be able to proudly face the elders of the Baruch clan."

"Yes, Lord Hogg," Hillman and Hiri responded.

"Squeak squeak!" Suddenly, the little Shadowmouse 'Bebe' scurried out from within Linley's clothes. He hopped onto Linley's shoulders to stare at Hogg, his little eyes filled with anger.

Mentally sensing the little Shadowmouse's emotions, Linley didn't know whether to laugh or to cry.

As it turned out, the little Shadowmouse had fallen asleep next to Linley's chest, but Hogg's explosive laughter startled him awake. An infant Shadowmouse spent a great deal of time napping, and hated being awakened. At this moment, naturally he was extremely furious.

"Shadowmouse. A magical beast, Shadowmouse?" Upon seeing the little Shadowmouse with Linley, Hogg's facial expressions changed dramatically.

"Father." Linley was afraid that his father would strike, so he hurriedly said, "The little Shadowmouse and I have already entered a soulbinding pact."

Hogg seemed to have been thunderstruck. He stared dumbly for a long moment. "You, you subdued and tamed this magical beast Shadowmouse?"

The two ways to tame a magical beast were 1) Subduing it by force, and 2) Setting up a soulbinding magic formation.

Hogg naturally knew very well that Linley's physical strength was very weak. And even the weakest Shadowmouse was of the third rank of power. And in addition, there was no way for Linley to set up a soulbinding magical formation, so that couldn't have happened at all.

“Yes, father, I’ve tamed him.” Linley said seriously.

Hogg only felt that his own son seemed to have dramatically changed, totally changed!

“Lord Hogg, Linley really did tame this Shadowmouse. I personally witnessed it. This little Shadowmouse is also the reason why in recent days, Linley has often caught wild animals to feed to the ‘adorable pet’ he had behind the back courtyard.” Hillman explained.

“He was feeding this ‘pet’?” Hogg thought for a moment, then stared at Linley disbelievingly. “Magical beast Shadowmouse. This is the ‘cute animal’ you told me you were feeding in the back courtyard?”

Linley nodded honestly.

Hogg didn’t know whether to laugh or to cry. The ‘cute pet’ was actually a magical beast?

Although he had many questions about how Linley might have entered a soulbinding pact with the little Shadowmouse, Hogg didn’t worry too much about it. Right now, he was in a wonderful mood.

“Fine, enough of that topic. Uncle Hiri, Hillman, lead the guards to make the arrangements right away. Tonight, I am going to host a magnificent banquet.” Hogg laughed loudly. Right now, his laughter was extremely full and carefree.

Linley stared at his father. From as far back as he could remember, he had never seen his father so happy.

.....

That very night.

It was extremely noisy inside the Baruch clan manor. Even the ten-plus bodyguards and their families had all been invited. There were five full tables placed in the main courtyard of the manor, and the entire Baruch manor was filled with laughter and joy.

“Yummy, yummy.” Little Wharton first grabbed this, then grabbed that, eating excitedly.

"Young master Linley, congratulations on being admitted to the Ernst Institute. In the future, young master Linley will no doubt become a mighty, powerful magus." A clan guard laughed as he toasted Linley politely.

During this banquet, Linley was the main attraction.

Upon hearing that Linley had been admitted to the Ernst Institute, everyone present had become excited. One could easily understand that entering the Ernst Institute meant entering a certain destiny. In the future, Linley definitely would not be constrained by tiny little Wushan township.

"Big brother, all of them are toasting you. I want to also." Little Wharton grabbed his juice cup.

Seeing little Wharton's greasy hands, Linley didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. But he still raised his own glass of juice and tapped it against little Wharton's cup.

"Come, we're brothers." Linley grinned as he lifted his cup as well.

....

Late night, the Baruch family ancestral hall. Only Linley and his father were present.

The door to the ancestral hall was closed, and a row of candles was lit in the entire hall, making it quite warm. At this moment, Hogg was staring at the spirit tablet in the middle of the hall. His voice low, he said, "Linley, after the fifth Dragonblood Warrior was born, our Baruch clan began to weaken, generation by generation, to the point where even our hereditary, ancestral heirloom was lost. Every time I think of this, I can't help but feel absolutely ashamed. We're supposed to be the noble Dragonblood Clan!"

Linley stood behind him without making a sound.

He felt the shame as well.

An ancient clan which had lasted five thousand years. The Dragonblood Warrior clan. Linley felt pride in his heart. But their ancestral heirloom had been lost.

"Linley." Hogg suddenly turned and looked at Linley solemnly. "From today forward, I will no longer treat you as a child. I will view you as the sturdiest pillar in the future of our Baruch clan! Our clan's hopes for the future will all rely on you, now."

"Yes, father." Linley resolutely nodded.

“Wait a moment. I am going to get something.” Hogg suddenly turned and entered a hidden room next to the ancestral hall. Shortly afterwards, he returned with a thick book in hand. “Linley, take this and give it a good read. Memorize everything.”

“This is?...”

Linley looked suspiciously at the thick book he had just accepted. There were no words on the cover, but when he opened it, there were four big words printed on the first page – Secret Dragonblood Training Tome.

Chapter 11 – The Secret Dragonblood Training Tome (part 2)

“The Secret Dragonblood Training Method?” Linley couldn’t help but look strangely at his father.

Hogg smiled. “Not only is it the Secret Dragonblood Training Method. This tome also discusses many things related to our Baruch clan. The Secret Dragonblood Training Tome is included within, as well as the method to create and control the Dragonblood Needles, as well as the history of some of the elders of our clan.”

Linley carefully flipped through it.

Indeed, the tome was divided into four sections. The first part was regarding the ‘Secret Dragonblood Training Tome’, while the rest were regarding other matters pertaining to the clan.

“Linley, even if this tome falls into the hands of outsiders, it would be useless to them, as there is simply no way an outsider can train in accordance with the Secret Dragonblood Training Method. As for our family history, so what if someone learns about it? What’s more, we have multiple copies of this tome as well. This one is also just a copy. After so many years have passed, the original has long since turned to dust.” Hogg laughed as he spoke.

Linley immediately laughed as well.

“Makes sense. Even if someone acquires it, it would be useless.” Linley immediately began to more curiously flip through the pages of the tome and read through each section.

Secret Dragonblood Training Tome, Chapter 1.

“If one wants to utilize the Secret Dragonblood Training Method, one must be able to call forth the blood of the Dragonblood Warriors flowing through their veins. There are two ways of calling forth the Dragonblood. The first method requires the density of the Dragonblood having reached a certain level. But if the density is insufficient, there is still a second method...”

Reading this, Linley was stunned.

Aside from a high density of Dragonblood, there was another method? Why hadn't anyone in the family succeeded in all these years, then?

“The second method is to take a deep drink of the blood of a living dragon, or of the blood of a dragon that just died a few minutes ago. The longer a dragon has been dead, the lower the chance of awakening the Dragonblood! A deep drink of dragon's blood can activate the inherent Dragonblood flowing in each member of our clan's veins. For the best results, drink the blood of a Saint-level dragon. If one only drinks the blood of a dragon of the ninth rank, the chances of activating one's Dragonblood is rather low.”

Reading through this, Linley was stunned.

“Our clan elders really were formidable. They actually came up with the idea of drinking the blood of a living dragon in order to utilize the Secret Dragonblood Training Method.” Linley didn't know whether to laugh or to cry.

“Drink the blood of a living dragon, and a Saint-level one at that? Linley, your ancestors really were extremely formidable.” Doehring Cowart had appeared by Linley's side and was reading the Tome as well. Seeing the introductory paragraphs, he couldn't help but feel shocked as well.

Hogg, of course, couldn't discover Doehring Cowart's existence at all. Hogg laughed bitterly at Linley. “Linley, did you see that? Based on our ancestor's method, the Dragonblood is lurking hidden within all of our veins. To call it forth, there are just two methods. But the second method requires one to drink the blood of a living dragon. How can that be an easy task? What's more...Linley, flip to the back and take a look.”

Linley flipped the page.

“However, this second method of drinking live dragon's blood is extremely risky. Dragon's blood is extremely forceful. When it is rubbed on one's body, it has the effect of improving the quality of one's body, rapidly increasing one's strength. However, it will also cause pain comparable to one's skin being peeled off. And this is just a topical application. If one actually drinks dragon's blood, then one's body

will feel as though it is being scorched, to the point where one can actually be burned to death, with veins exploding, causing immediate death.”

Upon seeing this part, Linley was utterly speechless.

“Father, who wrote this Secret Dragonblood Training Tome? Since it is so dangerous, why did he even include it?” Linley didn’t know what to say.

Hogg said with a solemn face, “Linley, this Secret Dragonblood Training Tome was written by our founder and first ancestor, the very first Dragonblood Warrior to appear in the Yulan continent, Baruch! He naturally must have had his own reasons for writing this down. Nonetheless, in our family history, there have been two descendants who drank the blood of a Saint-level dragon, and in the end, both of their veins erupted and they died.”

“There’s been people who have actually drank the blood of a Saint-level dragon?” Linley was somewhat shocked.

But actually, it was quite normal.

In the past, when the first, second, and third generation of Baruch clan members were all Dragonblood Warriors, the clan was in its glorious ascendancy. At that period in time, it wasn’t impossible to procure the blood of a Saint-level dragon.

“The events of the past happened too long ago. The real secrets of that era, this book has not revealed. All I know is that because of this, the dragon race sent representatives to engage in discussions with our Baruch clan’s clanlord. After this, our descendants no longer attempted this method. Later on, when our family line weakened, even when we wanted to drink dragon’s blood, we no longer were able to.” Hogg shook his head and sighed.

Linley nodded.

The arrogance of the dragon race was something discussed in many books.

Capturing a live Saint-level dragon to engage in bloodletting? How great a humiliation would this be for the dragon race? It was quite lucky for the Baruch clan that the dragon race didn’t exterminate them in a fiery rage. However, from this, one can imagine how powerful the Baruch clan was at that time.

“This can’t be right, father. If no one has ever successfully become a Dragonblood Warrior as a result of drinking dragon’s blood, then why did our ancestor write that it is possible to use dragon’s blood to refine our own? And even say that the blood of a dragon of the ninth rank would also have some effect?” Linley was really puzzled.

Hogg was startled.

“Linley, don’t ask too much. Honestly, I only know a little bit about our family history as well. As far as what happened four thousand years ago, there’s no way we can clearly know what happened.” Hogg laughed towards Linley.

Linley nodded.

But in his heart, Linley was still suspicious. If no one in history had ever successfully become a Dragonblood Warrior by drinking dragon’s blood, then why would this method be written down in the Secret Dragonblood Training Tome?

“Linley, it’s getting late. You should go back and get some rest.” Hogg laughed.

Linley nodded.

Night.

Linley had returned to his own bedroom and was reading the tome, but his heart was still full of questions.

“Grandpa Doebling, what do you think. If no one has ever succeeded using this method, how could it have been discovered?” Linley simply couldn’t understand the logic.

Doebling Cowart was so old that he had become as crafty as a fox. Stroking his white beard, he said in a self-satisfied manner, “Linley, the answer is simple. Based on what I know, the dragon race is extremely proud, and also extremely large and powerful! I wager that drinking the blood of a live dragon is probably an effective method, but your clan came under tremendous pressure from the dragon clan, and therefore altered the contents of this book.”

Linley immediately understood.

This was very possible.

Under pressure from the dragon race, the Dragonblood Warriors of the Baruch clan were undoubtedly forced to stop catching live dragons for bloodletting.

“But of course, that’s just my conjecture.” Doebling Cowart said placidly. “And Linley, based on what I know, drinking the blood of a live dragon is not necessarily a road to death. As long as you combine it with some Blueheart Grass, the negative effects of dragon’s blood will be negated. But I bet there’s very few people nowadays who know this secret.”

Linley was stunned.

And then, he was wildly overjoyed. "Grandpa Doebling, are you saying that fresh dragon's blood, when mixed with Blueheart Grass, is safe to drink?"

Doebling Cowart confidently nodded. "Of course. In the past, in the Pouant Empire, when a princess acquired a serious disease, in the end, the only method of curing her was a medicine that included a mixture of fresh dragon's blood and Blueheart Grass. As a matter of fact, I was the one who personally caught a Saint-level dragon."

"I remember the master physician who provided the prescription saying that everything in this world has its equal and opposite. For every single ingredient, there was another that would match with it. In that era, the only person who knew how to mix fresh dragon's blood with Blueheart Grass was that old physician. Since six thousand years have gone by, no doubt no one knows it any longer." Doebling Cowart said calmly.

Linley nodded.

"Fresh dragon's blood and Blueheart Grass..." Linley's eyes shone with excitement. "In the future, when I am powerful enough and become a magus of the ninth rank or even higher, I will use fresh dragon's blood and Blueheart Grass to let little Wharton become a Dragonblood Warrior."

Linley even hoped that...

If he had the chance, he himself would use this recipe.

If he could become both a Saint-level magus and a Dragonblood Warrior....but of course, that was just a dream. To even be able to catch a Saint-level dragon was a distant, untouchable dream.

"The road ahead is still long. Time to sleep, time to sleep. I need to train tomorrow."

Chapter 12- Instructions

Time flowed on, and in the blink of an eye, months had passed. Many new trees had begun to sprout on Wushan township, filling the area with a feeling of spring.

Beneath a pine tree.

Linley was seated cross-legged in a meditative trance, generating mageforce.

After having entered the meditative trance, Linley could clearly sense large amounts of earthen specks of light and green specks of light. These countless specks of lights continuously swirled into his body, and through his limbs and his bones, were purified and stored within the central dantian in his chest.

Within his central dantian, there was a smoky earthen mist intermingled with a smoky green mist.

The earthen mist was his earth element mageforce, while the green mist was his wind element mageforce.

“Whew.” Slowly releasing a breath, Linley exited his meditative trance.

Doehring Cowart, wearing a moon-white robe, was seated cross-legged next to him, a smile on his face as he enjoyed the surrounding scenery. Seeing Linley awaken, he laughed. “Linley, tomorrow you are heading to the Ernst Institute, yet you are still hard at work today?”

Linley’s lips curved up in a smile. “Grandpa Doehring, I believe you were the one who said that strong combatants must work hard every single day, and not relax for even an instant. Only long term training will produce astonishing power.”

“Little punk, so now you are going to give me instructions?” Doehring Cowart laughed while ‘grumbling’.

“Hehe,” Linley chortled.

“Woosh!” A black shadow from far away came flashing towards them, appearing on Linley’s shoulders in the blink of an eye. It was the Shadowmouse, ‘Bebe’. Young Bebe leaned towards Linley, making a chewing motion with his mouth, while pointing at a nearby dead hare.

Just from the look on Bebe’s face, Linley knew what was up.

“You want me to cook it?” Linley laughed as he spoke.

Bebe nodded repeatedly.

“Linley.” The nearby Doehring Cowart mentally spoke to him. “This little Shadowmouse is really quite strange. It’s been months, but judging from his size, it’s almost as though he hasn’t grown at all. For an infant Shadowmouse, the early childhood growth rate should be quite noticeable.”

“I have no idea either.” Linley shook his head.

Although Shadowmouse 'Bebe' did not increase in size, his speed was improving quite remarkably.

"It really is bizarre." Doehring Cowart looked at Bebe. Right now, Bebe didn't have any idea that a spirit was mentally weighing him.

"It's getting late. I'll need to start warrior training soon." Linley stood up and grabbed the dead hare as he began heading down the mountain. Doehring Cowart flew by his side, unhappily saying, "Linley, in the future, you will be a magus. Why are you still engaging in warrior training?"

Linley laughed, "Grandpa Doehring, I've discovered that warrior training can increase my endurance, and with increased endurance, my spiritual essence can increase as well."

"I know that, of course." Doehring Cowart said, dissatisfied. "But how could those basic training methods compare to the meditative trance in terms of how fast one's spiritual essence increases?"

Linley shut his mouth and no longer spoke.

While it was true that fighter training allowed one to improve one's spiritual essence, that wasn't the real reason.

The real reason that Linley continued his fighter training was this. "In the future, if I have the chance to drink fresh dragon's blood, I will be able to practice according to the Secret Dragonblood Training Tome. I have to keep up my physical training. The body is like a vessel, while battle-qi is like wine. The body is extremely important. The earlier I begin building my fundamentals, the faster my improvement will be when I study the Secret Dragonblood Training Tome in the future."

Actually, based on Linley's affinity for elemental essences, each day, he didn't have to spend too much time or effort to gather and generate mageforce.

Most of his time was spent in the meditative trance, training his spiritual essence.

But spending significant amounts of time training spiritual essence was exhausting. Warrior training served as a form of rest and alternative exercise.

.....

The next morning, all of the commoners of Wushan township gathered on the main road in town, all for the purpose of sending off Linley. It was definitely an incredibly

glorious thing for Wushan township to be able to produce a magus who would attend the Ernst Institute.

Each year, the Ernst Institute only accepted a hundred students from across the entire Yulan continent.

At the moment, Linley was still within the Baruch clan manor, while Hillman and the others were all outside. The only people within the manor were Hogg, Linley, little Wharton, and Housekeeper Hiri.

“Linley, today you are going to go to the Ernst Institute and formally become an Ernst Institute student. When you graduate from the Ernst Institute, you will be a powerful magus! Before you depart, as your father, I want to say to you...” On this last day, Hogg had a belly full of things he wanted to speak to Linley.

But after pausing for a long time, Hogg only said a few simple sentences. “Linley, remember the ardent desire that the elders of the Baruch clan have held for centuries, and remember the humiliation of the Baruch clan!”

Hogg’s face was turning slightly green.

“When you graduate, you will be at least a magus of the sixth rank. If you work hard and train hard, it won’t be too hard to become a magus of the seventh rank. And in addition, you are a dual-element magus! A dual-element magus of the seventh rank would definitely be a major force in the Kingdom of Fenlai. In the future, you will definitely be capable of retrieving our clan’s ancestral heirloom. If you do not, even if I die, I will not forgive you!” Hogg fixed a deathly stare on Linley.

“Even if I die, I will not forgive you!”

These words made Linley’s heart tremble.

These were the instructions his father gave to him upon their parting.

“Father, don’t worry. So long as I live, I will ensure that the ancestral heirloom of our Baruch clan is restored to us. I so swear!” Linley promised, meeting his father’s steely gaze, his own eyes filled with resolve as well.

Hogg’s eyes began to shine, and he patted Linley on the shoulder with a mighty clap.

“I believe in you, son!”

....

On the road headed east of Wushan township, Linley turned his head saw the hundreds of familiar faces which had come to send him off, with his father, Hogg, and his younger brother Wharton standing in the lead.

“Big brother, bye bye!” Little Wharton waved mightily.

Seeing his father and his younger brother, Linley also waved, his eyes turning red.

“Father. Wharton.” Linley’s heart was filled with longing.

Ever since he was born, Linley had never left home for an extended period of time, but this time, he would be gone for extremely long. At this moment, the little Shadowmouse, ‘Bebe’, was obediently perched on Linley’s shoulders, not making a sound, as if he sensed Linley’s thoughts. The nearby Doebling Cowart, in spirit form, also looked encouragingly at Linley.

“Linley, let’s go.” Hillman said. Hillman was escorting Linley to the Institute, acting as his bodyguard in the event they met with any bandits.

Linley unwillingly took one last glance at his family, and then finally forced himself to turn away and begin traveling in the direction of the Ernst Institute.

“Farewell, my family. Farewell, my home.”

Yulan calendar, year 9991. The nine year old Linley, accompanied by the young Shadowmouse, ‘Bebe’, and the Baruch clan’s guard captain, Hillman, departed from Wushan township.

Chapter 13 – A Congregation of Talents

Ernst Institute. The finest magus academy in the entire Yulan continent.

The Ernst Institutewas located in a rustic area approximately twenty kilometers south of the Holy Capital of Fenlai City. The Ernst Institute was founded and financially supported by the Radiant Church. Naturally, it was wealthy and knew how to throw around money. They took up a very large space, with a circumference of ten kilometers. Such a huge academy was nearly the size of a city.

Outside of the Ernst Institute, few visible signs of human presence could be seen, just an empty mountain range.

Restaurants, clothing stores, bars, and other sorts of service industries were all located on the campus itself. It could be said that the students of the Ernst Institute spent their entire lives within the campus.

“What an imposing style.” Linley stood at the gateway to the Ernst Institute. He couldn’t help but sigh with emotion.

The main gate of the Ernst Institute was fully fifty meters wide. Above the great gate was an enormous, crescent moon shaped construct, covered with all sorts of magical scripts which one could tell at a glance were amazingly complicated. Just from seeing how complicated the scripts were, one could imagine how powerful and mighty the magical formation protecting the Ernst Institute was.

Right now, the main gate of the Ernst Institute was a very lively place. There was an row of academic staff, and a single youth who had brought his admission letter and his proof of identity and had begun to be processed for intake. Linley immediately grabbed his own documents and headed in for processing as well.

“School officially starts February 9th. Today is February 8th. Based on the notification, students must arrive before February 9th. Since the young man in front of me is also just arriving today, no doubt he also lives rather close to the Institute.” Linley thought to himself.

The young man in front of Linley could actually be more precisely be described as a child. He was half a head shorter than Linley, and there was an old man by his side.

“Hi there. I’m from the O’Brien Empire, and my name is Reynolds [Lei’nuo].” The student being processed for intake in front of Linley suddenly turned his head and warmly greeted Linley.

Hearing that he came from the O’Brien Empire, Linley was startled. “The O’Brien Empire?”

The O’Brien Empire, one of the Four Great Empires, was located to the east of the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, while the Ernst Institute was located west of it. In order to reach the Ernst Institute, one had to circle around the entire Mountain Range of Magical Beasts from the north or the south. After all, aside from combatants of the ninth rank or Saint-level combatants, no one dared to directly cross that mountain range.

The Mountain Range of Magical Beasts was over ten thousand kilometers long.

For someone to come from the O'Brien Empire, the entire trip would have consisted of at least twenty thousand kilometers worth of travel. If they came from the eastern part of the Empire, the journey would have been even longer.

It probably would've taken about a year or so to travel twenty thousand kilometers.

"My name is Linley. I'm from Fenlai Kingdom." Linley courteously said to the boy called Reynolds.

Reynolds blinked, and sighed emotionally. "Fenlai Kingdom? Then you had it nice and cushy. It took me a full year just to get to Fenlai Kingdom from my home. It didn't take you too much time."

"Right. From my home to here, I travelled for about half a day." Linley honestly replied.

"Whoah..." The expression on Reynolds face was priceless.

One of them travelled for over a year. The other, for just half a day.

"Students, hurry up." One of the test administrators nearby urged.

One of the intake processes for new students was to retake the magus test. After all, the Ernst Institute was afraid that someone might steal an admissions letter and falsely enroll.

"Coming." Reynolds went to take the test.

Upon seeing the results, Linley couldn't help but feel shocked.

This boy named Reynolds had high elemental essence affinity...and as for his spiritual essence...

"Reynolds, eight years old. Spiritual essence, thirty two times higher than students his own age. Exceptional level."

Hearing these numbers, Linley's eyes briefly bulged. But the test administrator seemed to be very calm, and not the least bit surprised.

"Linley, what is it? Amazed just by this?" Reynolds said dismissively. "This is the Ernst Institute. Each year, they accept only a hundred students from across the entire Yulan continent. Which one of them is not an amazing talent? My results can only be considered average, across the student base."

"But the Ernst Institute does show some favoritism to the Holy Union. They accept fifty students from the Holy Union, and only fifty more total from the other Four Great Empires. It is so unfair." Reynolds sighed.

Linley chuckled when he heard this.

The Ernst Institute was founded by the Radiant Church. Of course it would show favoritism towards the Holy Union.

"My turn." Linley ran towards the test giver as well.

Reynolds wrinkled his little nose. "This fellow called Linley is from the Holy Union. He no doubt had a much easier time being accepted than me. I bet he isn't as talented as I am." Reynolds was extremely confident.

But when the test administrator reported Linley's results, Reynolds was shocked.

"High spiritual essence, exceptional elemental essence affinity? And dual-element affinity for earth and wind?" Reynolds was totally speechless.

Exceptional elemental essence affinity was already extremely rare, but Linley was not only dual-element, but had exceptional affinity for both the wind and the earth elemental essences. This was a true talent, one rather more formidable than even himself. After all...dual-element magi were extremely powerful.

"Reynolds, don't just stand there looking silly. Let's go." Linley laughed.

"Oh." Reynolds was a year younger than Linley, but judging from appearances, seemed three years younger.

Linley and Reynolds accepted their Ernst Institute student ID's, then acquired their residence keys. At the Ernst Institute, all students, regardless of wealth and economic background, had to live together. Tuition fees and residence fees were totally waived.

However...

"Hey, you have to pay tuition?" When Linley saw the old man accompanying Reynolds pull out the tuition money, he couldn't help but feel shocked.

Hillman, besides Linley, laughed. "Linley, the tuition waiver and rent waiver provided by the Ernst Institute is only for members of the Holy Union. All others have to pay an extremely high fee."

Reynolds nodded also.

The old man next to him smiled at Linley. "That's right. This isn't just the rule for the Ernst Institute; the number one warrior academy in the Yulan continent, the O'Brien Academy, does the same. They provide a full tuition waiver for their own Empire's students, but charge an astronomical fee for students coming from other places."

Linley wasn't stupid. He immediately understood.

"Linley, my young master has the same residence key as you. The two of you should be living in the same residence. I hope that in the future, the two of you can help each other out." The old man said.

Reynolds said unhappily, "Okay, Grandpa Lomu [Lu'mu], you can go back now. I've already arrived at the Ernst Institute."

"Uncle Hillman, you can go back as well. I can take care of myself." Linley smiled as he spoke to Hillman, and Hillman nodded back, satisfied. "Linley, then I'll go back now. Work hard." Hillman encouraged.

Linley smiled and nodded.

"Linley, let's go." Reynolds warmly grabbed Linley by the hand, and began to run into the Institute.

"Farewell, Uncle Hillman."

Hillman and the old man both watched the children enter the Institute. Only after a long time did they depart.

After saying his farewells to Uncle Hillman, Linley and Reynolds entered the Ernst Institute together. The Ernst Institute was filled with shady groves, lakes, stone bridges, ancient buildings...an ancient aura permeated the entire place. Just from the size of the giant trees, which seven people would have to surround in order to hold hands, one could imagine how old the place was.

"It really is something. It isn't nearly as gaudy as some of the newer institutes. This is what is known as 'sophistication'." Reynolds' curious eyes took in their surroundings while he spoke.

Within the Ernst Institute, as a one-time event, there were many instructional signs telling students where each location was. Clearly, this was intended to help assist the new students.

"Linley, let's go find our dorm." Reynolds, pulling Linley's hand, began hurrying in the direction of the dormitories.

Dorm number 1987.

Linley and Reynolds had completed their intake processes at the same time, one after another. Most dorms held four students. When Linley and Reynolds arrived at the dormitory area, they couldn't help but sigh in amazement. At first glance, there appeared to be thousands of stand-alone dormitories.

Amongst the thousands of dormitories, there were even a few two-story apartment style dorms.

"1987, 1987..." Linley and Reynolds inspected the dorm numbers, running south nonstop.

The dorm area was numbered very logically, beginning from 0001, with each row housing 100 individual dorms. When Linley arrived at row 20, he saw dorm 1901. And then, as they continued running east, Reynolds began to pant for breath, until finally, they arrived at dorm 1987.

Chapter 14 - The Bros of Dorm 1987 (part 1)

"Whew, I'm exhausted. Linley, how come you are in such good shape?" Reynolds was panting for breath, but Linley didn't feel anything.

"What, you are tired already?" Linley started to laugh. How short a distance had they just run?

He didn't even feel too tired after running from Wushan township to the Ernst Institute.

"Hey, just put it down there. Right. Put the box down there. Put it down carefully. If you break it, there's no way you can afford to compensate for it!" From within dorm 1987, the clear voice of another youth could be heard. Linley and Reynolds glanced at each other, then entered curiously. Immediately upon entering, they saw several muscular men busily moving things about.

A gaudily-dressed youth was standing in the center of the room, directing their moves.

Immediately upon seeing Linley and Reynolds, the young man's eyes brightened, and he excitedly ran over. "Haha, you guys are my dormmates, right? I've waited so long for you guys. Up til now, it's just been me here. Lemme introduce myself. My

name is Yale [Ye'lu], and I suppose I just barely qualify as a member of the Holy Union."

"What do you mean, you just barely qualify as a member of the Holy Union?" Reynolds mumbled, and then said, "My name is Reynolds. I'm from the O'Brien Empire."

"My name is Linley. I'm from the Holy Union's Kingdom of Fenlai." Linley smiled as well.

As long term dormmates, in the future, they would be together for a long period of time.

"Oh, Reynolds, Linley, I am so happy to see you fellows. Hey, where did my exercise equipment go?" Yale turned his head and stared at his servants.

"Exercise equipment?" Reynolds blinked at Yale. "Yale, what do you have those for? Are you going to be a warrior?"

Yale wrinkled his nose as he chortled. "Although I am a dignified magus, I still need to work out and have a good physique. Otherwise, how will I be able to seduce beautiful women? There's many beautiful women amongst the ranks of the magi. And the female magi of the Ernst Institute are not only pretty; they are also very classy. Plus, there's a lot of face to be gained by being able to brag to others that I have an Ernst Institute student as my girlfriend."

"Uh..." Reynolds was speechless.

Linley didn't know what to say either. Seeing the exercise equipment, Linley wanted to go work out, but he didn't expect that these were the tools which Yale planned to use to do bodybuilding to seduce pretty girls.

"I'm eight years old. How about you, Yale?" Reynolds clearly was very open-minded.

Yale was extremely tall. The nine-year old Linley was already 1.5 meters tall, but Yale was half a head taller than even Linley.

"Me? I'm ten. Haha, but I'm not getting any younger. My elder brother lost his virginity at age twelve. I've got to do some advance preparations as well." Yale's eyes shone.

"What does 'losing virginity' mean?" Reynolds looked questioningly at Yale.

"Yeah, what's 'losing virginity'?" Linley also looked curiously at Yale.

Staring at his two dormmates, Yale became momentarily speechless as well. Besides Linley, the ghostly form of Doebling Cowart was holding his belly as he laughed uproariously. This made Linley ask him curiously, "Grandpa Doebling, why are you laughing?"

"Young master, we've arranged everything." An extremely muscular man said respectfully.

"Mm. You can leave now. Go back and tell my father that in the future, if there isn't something urgent, not to bother me. Oh, right. Remember...every year, he can't forget to transfer money into my magicite card. He should know very well that a magus needs a lot of money for his magistaff and socketable gems." Yale said loudly and casually.

"Yes, young master." The man said respectfully.

Yale nodded, satisfied, then dismissed the men with a wave of his hand, as though he were a general.

"Magicrystal card?" Reynolds stared at him in amazement. "The magicrystal card is only offered by the 'Golden Bank of the Four Empires', which all four of the great empires established together. I heard that the processing fees for requesting a card totals a hundred gold coins."

"Right on." Yale was quite knowledgeable about this. "The minimum starting balance for a magicrystal card is at least a thousand gold coins. But I'm afraid that a thousand coins wouldn't be enough to even sustain a month's worth of expenditures for me."

Linley, upon hearing these words...

"Rich guy." Linley sighed to himself.

His own father gave him only a hundred gold coins each year for living costs. In fact, in Linley's eyes, a hundred gold coins was more than enough. After all, most commoners would only make twenty or thirty gold coins in wages after a year of hard labor.

"You really are a rich guy. My dad only gives me two hundred gold coins a year." Reynolds mumbled. "And he even said that he wants me to spend my time focused on studying magic."

"Just a hundred for me," Linley laughed. "But for a simple life, it's enough."

"Bah, bros, my money is your money. If you run out, just come find me! In the future, we'll probably be living together for decades. We'll be bros for decades. Why quibble about 'yours' and 'mine'?" Yale was extremely expansive, but just as he finished speaking...

Linley and Reynolds both started.

"Decades?" Linley stared at Yale in shock.

Yale said casually and naturally, "Linley, you can only graduate from the Ernst Institute if you reach the rank of a magus of the sixth rank. For a magus, the higher you progress, the harder it becomes. For most people, it takes a couple decades to become a magus of the sixth rank."

Linley frowned.

Decades? He was going to be a fiscal burden to his father for decades?

"Grandpa Doehring, why didn't you tell me this?"

Doehring Cowart's voice rang out in his mind. "Linley, relax. For most people, decades will be needed to reach the sixth rank, yes. Under my tutelage, I can let you become a magus of the sixth rank in just ten years."

Ten years.

In ten years, Linley would only be nineteen years old. Only now did Linley relax.

"Is everyone here already?" A clear voice rang out, as a child walked into the room. Approximately the same height as Reynolds, this child looked a bit more mature. "Hello, everyone. My name is George [Qiao'zhi]. I'm ten, and I'm from the Yulan Empire."

Yale, Reynolds, and Linley all gave basic introductions about themselves to the newcomer.

"The Yulan Empire?" Linley was startled.

The Yulan Empire. The most ancient of the empires of the Yulan continent. When the Yulan calendar was first started, ten thousand years ago, the Yulan Empire controlled the entire Yulan continent. And then, as time passed, the Yulan continent began to fall into war, causing the Yulan Empire to fragment as well.

By this era, the Yulan Empire had become just one of the Four Great Empires.

But despite this, the Yulan Empire was still the most economically powerful of the empires, and it was also filled with magi. The magus academy of the Yulan Empire was second only to the Ernst Institute.

“George, the magus academies of the Yulan Empire aren’t that bad. Why did you rush all the way here?” Yale said in amazement.

George smiled. “Although the magus academies of the Yulan Empire are very good, they are still a bit weaker than the Ernst Institute. If you’re going to go to school, you should go to the best. Although the journey was a bit long, it could be considered a form of training as well.”

“George, you are ten? But you look the same as me.” Reynolds said to the side.

George immediately began to laugh.

The eight-year old Reynolds and the ten-year old George were of the same height. Both were the shortest in the group. Linley was half a head taller than them, while Yale was the tallest of them all.

“Enough of that topic. I just found out from the admissions office that every one of the hundred new students have at least high levels in both elemental affinity and spiritual essence. I even discovered guys who have ‘exceptional’ levels in both elemental affinity and spiritual essence. What monsters.” George seemed to have good inside information.

Yale pursed his lips. “That’s very normal. Which student in the Ernst Institute is weak? Myself, my elemental affinity and spiritual essence are both high level, putting me towards the bottom of the pack of our one hundred. If it wasn’t for the fact that my old man has a special relationship with the Radiant Church, I probably wouldn’t even be able to make it in.”

Linley couldn’t help but stare at Yale in shock.

This Yale fellow’s dad surely was something quite amazing, to have a special relationship with the Radiant Church.

“The person in our dorm with the highest natural talent is Linley. But have you guys heard of the unmatched talent who is studying at the Ernst Institute?” Yale glanced at the other three.

Linley and Reynolds both shook their heads.

But George smiled as he nodded. "I've heard of him. The number one genius of the Ernst Institute, 'Dixie' [Di'ke'xi], a talent that appears once in a century. He is a dual-element magus, and has exceptional levels of elemental affinity and spiritual essence. But his spiritual essence is especially amazing; 62 times that of others his age. Usually, reaching 30 times is considered 'exceptional' level, so his precise level should be 'super exceptional', but since the highest level is 'exceptional', that's what he is classified as."

Linley understood.

Dual-element. Exceptional elemental affinity and spiritual essence.

"I'm just ten-something times that of other people my age, but that genius has 68 times the spiritual essence of people his age." Linley sighed in amazement.

The Ernst Institute really did have as many talents as there were clouds in the sky. It could also be said to have congregated all of the magical geniuses of the Yulan continent. Here, Linley could only be considered above average. However...behind Linley, there was a five-thousand year old Saint-level Grand Magus!

Chapter 15 – The Bros of Dorm 1987 (part 2)

Most of the students of the Ernst Academy would stay at the Institute for decades, so usually by the time of graduation, fellow dormmates would be extremely close friends. Although Yale, Reynolds, Linley and George were all more mature than most others their age, at heart, they were still children.

After just chatting for a short period of time, the four of them immediately grew very close.

"Everyone, let's spend the day getting to know our campus better. Tonight, I'll treat you all to dinner! Haha." Yale slapped his chest and said enthusiastically.

"This guy even has a magicrystal card. If we don't take advantage of him, who else would we take advantage of?" Reynolds laughed.

George and Linley were both still children, and they immediately grinned evilly.

"Squeak squeak!" At this moment, the little Shadowmouse, 'Bebe', suddenly popped his head out from within Linley's clothes. Having just woken up, the little Shadowmouse was feeling lonely, so he popped his head out.

“Whoah, what’s that?” Reynolds was so startled he jumped.

“Bebe, you woke up?” Linley laughed as he stroked Bebe’s little head. Bebe closed his eyes in contentment, and then opened his little eyes and peered at Reynolds, Yale, and George. His little nose snorted three times, as though he looked down at them.

“Magical beast, it’s a magical beast! I’ve seen them in books.” Yale suddenly shouted.

“Linley, you have a magical beast companion?” Reynolds and George were also shocked.

They were all children. How could one of them make a magical beast submit to them?

“Bebe is just a baby magical beast. I just gave him some food, which made him like me. So I entered a soulbinding contract with him.” Linley laughed.

“Good heavens, that’s a magical beast! Linley, you are really formidable. I’ve dreamed of having one since I was young.” Yale stared at Bebe, his eyes shining. “Although I have access to soulbinding formation scrolls, I don’t have the ability to force a magical beast to submit to me.”

Yale said in a depressed voice.

“You aren’t able to subdue a magical beast? Not even an infant?” Linley laughed.

Yale shook his head. “I’m not even a magus of the first rank yet. Based on my strength, maybe I could train a magical beast of the first or second rank, but what would I do with such a weak critter? And the infants of magical beasts of the seventh or eighth ranks are extremely hard to acquire. What’s more, the infants of those beasts are more powerful than me, even as babies.”

Linley agreed with him silently.

The little Shadowmouse, ‘Bebe’, currently was as strong as a magical beast of the fifth rank. He was far stronger than Linley. But having been together with Bebe for half a year, he could tell that Bebe didn’t grow larger at all. This was what confused both Linley and Doehring Cowart.

“Linley, this little Shadowmouse is named Bebe? Can you have Bebe allow me to cuddle him?” Reynolds gaze was glued to the little Shadowmouse.

“Bebe?”

Linley immediately asked Bebe through their soul link.

"No, no way." Bebe could also express some simple intentions to Linley through their soul link. At the same time, Bebe flashed his fangs towards Reynolds. "Squeak squeak!" He squeaked loudly, clearly very angry.

Reynolds couldn't help but pucker his lips in disappointment.

"Reynolds, I'll tell you a secret. Bebe loves to eat roast meat. If in the future, you can feed him some roast ducks or roast chickens, I believe that he won't be very hostile to you." Linley laughed upon seeing Reynolds eyes shine.

"Can do."

Reynolds suddenly frowned as he turned to Yale. "Yale, if in the future I run out of money, you've got to lend me some. When Grandpa Lomu comes, I'll pay you back."

"No problem." Yale said magnanimously.

"I bet everyone hasn't had a chance to get a good look at the campus yet, right? Let's go for a stroll and familiarize ourselves, shall we?" George smiled as he spoke.

Of the four bros, George was the most amiable and steadiest boy. Reynolds was the most childish one of them. Yale...was the playboy type. As for Linley, in the eyes of the other three boys, he was the most mysterious.

Dual-element magus, exceptional affinity, and a magical beast companion.

He really was mysterious.

The ancient Ernst Institute was filled with countless buildings which were thousands of years old. In front of some of them, there were even introductory placards.

The youngest of them eight, the oldest of them ten. The children stared worshipfully at each famous name, especially at the histories of the Saint-level combatants, which caused their hearts to beat faster. All of them dreamed of one day becoming a Saint-level combatant.

But a voice right next to Linley's ear kept on grumbling. "Nothing more than some promising latter-day youths. This guy is actually bragging about killing a Violet-Tattooed Black Bear? A Saint-level combatant who can only kill ninth level magical beasts and not Saint-level magical beasts can only be considered a newbie Saint-level."

Many famous graduates of the Ernst Institute were bashed by Doehring Cowart as not worth mentioning.

....

The four bros of dorm 1987, along with the little Shadowmouse 'Bebe', strolled about the entire campus, gaining a basic level of familiarization. That very night, the four of them went to a lavishly decorated hotel next to the dormitory area and had themselves a feast. But of course, all they drank was juice.

The next day. February 9th. School started.

There were no classes this day; those would start on February 10th. February 9th was meant to go and listen to the exhortations of school management to work hard. This group of six-to-twelve year olds filled the auditorium. They didn't know exactly who the people speaking to them were, so many of the children began to daydream. When the ceremony concluded, all of them happily departed.

After dinner, the four bros of dormitory 1987 were all seated on chairs inside the dorm and discussing their classes.

"It's so easy here. Just one class a day. Oh, Linley is dual-element, so he has two." Yale sighed. "But the Ernst Institute is really relaxed. If you want to attend class, you can. If you don't want to, you can skip."

George calmly smiled. "Yale, don't grow complacent. Although there aren't formal requirements for students, every year, there will be an ability test. Only if you advance a rank in power can you advance a grade. If you don't work hard, do you plan to stay here for a century? What's more, the Ernst Institute has a rule that if one does not become a magus of the sixth rank in sixty years, one will be expelled, no exceptions."

Reading the various regulations of the Institute written on the introductory packet, Linley nodded silently.

Although the school had lax supervision, allowing one to not study at all for sixty years, once you reached the end of those sixty years, if you still had not become a magus of the sixth rank, you would be directly expelled.

"Expelled?" Yale stared. "If I really were to be expelled, my old man would probably kill me." Expulsion by the Ernst Institute would result in an unbearably humiliating reputation. No one would be willing to shoulder it. After all, to have been accepted meant they were all talented people.

"Class starts tomorrow. I wonder how the teachers are. If they aren't even as good as my Grandpa Lomu, I'll have come for nothing." Reynolds mumbled.

“Reynolds, your Grandpa Lomu is a magus?” Linley asked, somewhat surprised.

“Of course. On the long road from the O’Brien Empire to the Ernst Institute, Grandpa Lomu had already begun to teach me magic.” Reynolds said proudly.

When Linley and the other three were chatting with each other, they all felt very excited.

“The earth element class isn’t that important. In terms of understanding the earth element, how could any of the teachers at the Ernst Institute compare with Grandpa Doebling? The most important class is the wind element class. I wonder what wind magic is like?”

The day had already begun to grow dark, but the sounds of laughter and chatter continued to sound out from the four children within dormitory 1987.

Chapter 16 – Wind-Style Magic

For the academic calendar of the Ernst Institute, every month, the first twenty eight days had classes. Only the last two days were free.

Earth magic classes were taught from 8:00 AM to 10:00 AM in the morning, fire magic was taught from 10:30 AM to 12:30 PM in the afternoon, water magic from 2:00 PM to 4:00 PM in the afternoon, wind magic from 4:30 PM to 6:30 PM in the afternoon, lightning magic from 7:00 PM to 9:00 PM at night, and light magic from 9:30 PM to 11:30 PM at night.

But since the majority of students were single element, they only had to take two hours of classes a day. Linley was dual-element, which meant each day he had just four hours of classes. But because these classes were on a voluntary basis, if you didn’t want to go, no one would force you.

The school of earth magic was divided into six classes, with each class having its own building. New students and first rank magi attended the first grade class, magi of the second rank attended the second grade class, magi of the third rank attended the third grade class...and so on, up until the sixth rank who attended the sixth grade class.

Magi of the sixth rank could choose to graduate at any point in time. But naturally, if they elected not to, they could continue to study.

February 10. Within the classroom of first grade classes.

The classroom for first grade earth magic was extremely large, and was capable of seating hundreds of students. Twenty students had already arrived, and Linley selected a seat located relatively in front, sitting down. At 8:00 AM, there were around fifty students present.

"I expect only part of the students present are new. I wonder how long the others have spent here." Linley wondered to himself.

After all, for a new student to reach the second rank, usually they would need to train for several years.

"Greetings, everyone." An amiable, kindly looking brown-haired middle aged man stood in front of the class. "My name is Wendi [Wen'di], and I will be your instructor in earth magic. Today, we have approximately twenty new students. So, same as always, first we are going to have our new students introduce themselves, so that we can all get to know each other."

Immediately, one new student after another began to introduce themselves.

"My name is Gerhans [Ge'er'han]. I come from the great grasslands to the far east."

Upon hearing Gerhan's self-introduction, Linley was shocked. "The students here really do come from all over the Yulan continent. There's even someone from the great grasslands in the far eastern part of the Yulan continent."

In the great map of the Yulan continent...

The Holy Union and the Dark Alliance were located west of the Yulan continent's Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. East of the range were the Four Great Empires, but even further east of the empires was a vast grassland, which contained three kingdoms of its own. The distance between the great grasslands and the Ernst Institute was unbelievably great. A one way trip alone would take at least three years!

"My name is Linley. I'm from the Holy Union." Linley as well walked to the front of the classroom and gave a basic introduction of himself.

After the self-introductions were complete, the earth-style magus Wendi began to brag about earth-style magic's power. Only in the second hour of the class did he actually begin to instruct in earth-style magic.

Linley and the group of students just listened quietly. Next to Linley, Doehring Cowart appeared as well.

"This fellow has a very solid foundation. Although he isn't very strong, in terms of teaching magi of the first rank, not even magi of the eighth or ninth rank would necessarily be a better teacher." Doehring Cowart nodded as he sighed in praise.

Linley knew a great deal about earth-style magic by now, so listening to the lecture was very easy for him.

"But Grandpa Doehring, although his foundation is solid, he isn't able to distill the profound into simple words like you. He seems to make it more complicated." Linley said.

Doehring Cowart laughed self-confidently. Stroking his white beard, he said, "Naturally. A Saint-level Grand Magus' understanding of magic is far greater than that of a magus of the eighth or ninth rank. The Saint-level is a totally new realm of existence. Naturally, my teachings regarding magic are more profound and point more directly to the underlying nature of magic."

After listening to this class, Linley made a decision.

"From today forward, I will only attend the earth magic class once a month." Linley didn't want to waste his time.

Linley had it all planned out. Every day, he would spend some time outside training in magic. As for the place he would do the training...Linley had already chosen a place, a mountain located right behind the Ernst Institute. Being located near a mountain range, naturally there were many mountains near the Institute.

Four in the afternoon.

Linley was intently listening to the teachings being given in the wind-style magic class.

"Greetings, everyone," a handsome, yellow-haired youngster said with a smile. "I am a sixth grade student, Trey [Te'lei]. From today onwards, I will be responsible for teaching you wind-style magic. I live in dorm 0298, so if you have any questions after class ends, you can come find me there."

Sixth grade students, being magi of the sixth rank who could apply for graduation at any time, were fully qualified to teach students of the first or second grades.

"Before this, let's all first introduce ourselves." Trey smiled.

This was a basic rule to start off every class for the first time. All of the students gave self-introductions.

“Hey, Linley, have you noticed? There’s lots of cute girls amongst the wind-style students. Check it. That little blonde girl just smiled at you.” Doehring Cowart, next to Linley, pointed as he spoke. “Based on what that little blonde girl just said, her name seems to be Delia [Di’li’ya]. Delia. Such a cute name. Based on my 1300 years of experience, when this little girl grows up, she’ll be a beauty for sure. Linley, smile at her and build a good foundation. That way, in the future, you’ll be able to advance the relationship.”

Right now, Linley was totally ignoring Doehring Cowart.

Linley was focused on the wind-style magus instructor ‘Trey’, and closely listening to Trey’s teachings.

“Wind-style magi are the fastest, most nimble magi in the world. In addition, we are the only magi who can fly before reaching the Saint-level!” Trey’s words and mannerisms all conveyed the love which he felt towards wind magic. “Do you wish to use your own power to fly above the skies? To soar in the air and gaze down upon countless mountains? How wonderful the feeling is, and how many people desire it!”

The eyes of many of the children who were seated below, listening, began to shine.

Fly?

Who wouldn’t want to?

“A Saint-level magus can fly, yes, but the Ernst Institute can perhaps produce just one, at most, in a century! But we magi of the wind-style can, upon attaining the fifth rank, immediately execute the ‘Floating Technique’.” Trey said confidently, “And wind-style magi are extremely fast. When they execute the ‘Supersonic’ technique, they can dramatically increase their speed.”

“But of course, those are just common techniques. The legendary forbidden technique, ‘Annihilating Tempest’, is the most powerful destructive technique of them all. There’s also the legendary forbidden technique, ‘Dimensional Edge’, which is the most powerful one-on-one attacking technique.” Trey’s voice was filled with reverence.

Many of the youths stared wide-eyed.

“Hmph, how can the Annihilating Tempest be considered the most powerful destructive technique? What about my earth-style’s ‘Heaven Collapses, Earth Shatters’ and ‘Heavenly Meteor’s Descent’?” Doehring Cowart, upon hearing these words, was somewhat unhappy.

“Grandpa Doebling, what is this ‘Dimensional Edge’ technique?” Linley asked.

Given that Grandpa Doebling had not mentioned the ‘Dimensional Edge’ spell, Linley believed that perhaps it really was the most powerful one-on-one attacking technique of them all.

“The Dimensional Edge spell? It can slice through the dimensional walls which separates matter itself. Of course it is powerful. But although it is ridiculously strong in one-on-one combat, it’s still only a one shot spell. How can it compare to our earth-style’s ‘World Protector’, which can battle nonstop with the enemy?” Doebling Cowart was quibbling and equivocating.

But Linley could tell.

This Dimensional Edge spell clearly possessed a terrifying power. And most likely, it wasn’t as simple as Grandpa Doebling made it out to be. A one-shot technique? Even a one-shot technique could be enough, if the opponent couldn’t dodge.

“If I can become both a Dragonblood Warrior as well as utilize wind-style magic, then...” Linley’s heart was moved.

And then, he just continued to listen to the class. Linley became more and more intrigued by wind-style magic. Of the four elements of earth, fire, water and wind, each contained profound mysteries which were as deep as the sea. The ocean of magical knowledge was an endless one. And now, Linley had begun to wade into its depths.

Chapter 17 – A Learning Period (part 1)

Spring left and autumn came. In the blink of an eye, Linley had spent half a year at the Ernst Institute.

During those days in school, Linley was like a thirsty man of the desert, frantically drinking up the basic fundamentals to magic. With regards to wind-style magic, Linley’s knowledge and strength continued to rise as well, and Doebling Cowart would give him pointers every so often as well.

Today, the sunlight was bright and beautiful.

The four boys of dorm 1987 had just finished lunch. They were wearing a set of sky-blue robes, the school uniform of the Institute. Because of constant physical training, Linley appeared all the more mesmerizing, with his elegant form covered by the sky-

blue robes. This was why quite a few of the young girls in the wind magic class liked to chat with Linley.

At this moment, the four bros were walking while chatting idly.

“Right, Linley, today the rest of us are going to attend the new students fellowship. Are you going?” George chortled.

George loved to participate in student unions and fellowships, and he was excellent in ferreting out news and making new friends. Although he had only been in school for half a year, amongst the first grade students of the Ernst Institute, George had become a mover and a shaker.

“Nope.” Linley’s answer was succinct and direct.

“Haha, I knew Linley definitely wouldn’t go.” Reynolds laughed loudly.

Putting his arm around Linley’s shoulders, Yale sighed, “Linley, my man, there’s no need to be this diligent when it comes to studying. Based on your talent, if you just expend a bit of effort, in thirty years you can easily become a magus of the sixth rank. Why do you have to work so crazy hard? You should learn to relax and enjoy life. There’s a lot of cute girls who will be at the fellowship, you know.”

“Right. Really cute girls.” Reynolds opened his eyes wide and nodded.

Linley could only sigh helplessly.

Under the guidance of the Yale, that innocent youngster, Reynolds, had begun to go astray.

“Yale, you pervert, stop tugging at me. Alright, time for me to go train. Tomorrow is the end of the month, I’ll hang out with you guys then.” Linley laughed. The last two days of each month, Linley let himself take two days break.

Knowing Linley’s temperament, Yale, Reynolds, and George all nodded.

Linley immediately walked off, quietly but quickly heading towards the mountains behind the school. There were thousands of students at the Ernst Institute, and there were also many magi who were researching new spells here. There were also many servers. In short, the Ernst Institute was a well-populated place.

On the road to the mountains, many students wearing blue gowns could be seen as well.

“Growl...” A low roar sounded.

Linley turned aside to look, and his eyes brightened. "A magical beast!"

A flowing mane, slick cyan fur, and four thick, forceful limbs. A pair of eyes filled with wildness, viciousness, and a cold fierceness. Those coldly flashing golden claws made onlookers' hearts tremble.

The magical beast, 'Windwolf'.

A terrifying magical beast that moved as fast as the wind itself.

The most terrifying thing one could encounter in a forest of magical beasts was a pack of Windwolves. If you encountered them, based on their speed, there was no way you could escape.

A handsome, black-haired man was seated atop the Windwolf. The young man was staring delightedly around him, seeming to be very proud of having such a fine magical beast.

"This should be a magical beast of the fifth or sixth rank," Linley decided.

At the Ernst Institute, there were indeed quite a few people who had magical beasts. Aside from the magi who had been invited to come to the Institute, some fifth and sixth grade students were able to buy soulbinding formation scrolls and had managed to tame some magical beasts to serve as their mounts.

"It's just a magical beast. Why be so cocky about it?" Linley looked somewhat contemptuously at the self-pleased youngster.

After departing from the school, Linley entered the mountain in the rear.

The mountain behind the Ernst Institute was an extremely wide ranging one. Long, long ago, magical beasts used to live in this mountain, but as time went on, all of the magical beasts were exterminated by the magi of the Institute. By now, there were only a few normal beasts still living here.

Upon entering the mountain, Linley's speed increased dramatically.

He naturally began to use the wind-style 'Supersonic' spell, turning his entire body as light as a leaf. Like a spirit, he wound his way through the mountains. After running for several kilometers, Linley reached his target destination, an empty area next to some flowing water.

"Squeak squeak." Bebe chirped at Linley.

Linley chuckled and said, "You want to go out and play again? Fine, but don't run off too far." Linley had a lot of faith in Bebe. A year had passed since he had met the little guy, but although Bebe still hadn't grown larger, and was still just twenty centimeters long, his speed had dramatically improved.

"Magi? Perhaps a warrior of the eighth rank would be able to catch the little Shadowmouse, but only a Saint-level magus would be able to do the same." Linley knew very well how strong the bodies of most magi were.

The little Shadowmouse, Bebe, scurried into the mountain forests.

"Grandpa Doehring, please come out and instruct me." Linley immediately said mentally.

A mist flew out, transforming into Doehring Cowart. Doehring Cowart blinked and glanced at Linley. "Linley, what's going on? In the past, haven't you always ignored this old fellow and entered the meditative trance first? Why are you calling me out now? I was having a wonderful nap just now, hmph. You ruined my beautiful dream."

Linley quirked his lips.

Although Grandpa Doehring was a Saint-level Grand Magus, after getting to know him, Linley realized that although he looked kindly and amiable on the outside, on the inside, he was a playful scamp.

"Grandpa Doehring, I feel like I have reached the level of a magus of the second rank. I want you to take a look and see for yourself." Linley finally said.

"A magus of the second rank?"

Intrigued, Doehring Cowart ran some calculations. "Hmm, right, about a year has passed since you started learning with me. Right, first, perform the introductory spell of 'Shattered Rocks'. Do your absolute best, understood?"

'Shattered Rocks' could be considered a spell which scaled.

There was a 'Shattered Rocks' spell of the first rank, but there was also a Saint-level spell for the 'Shattered Rocks'; only, the name for it was called 'Heavenly Meteor's Descent'. Naturally, when the strength of an earth-style magus increased, his power in using the 'Shattered Rocks' would also increase.

"Yes, Grandpa Doehring."

Linley immediately began to quietly mouth the words to a spell. The words had long since been memorized by Linley to the point where he could recite them without thinking. As the words to the spell continued, Linley could feel his entire spirit enter a special mode.

The earth-style mageforce in his chest began to roil about, and natural elemental essence began to gather there as well.

Suddenly, the nearby earth began to crack and shatter.

Five skull-sized pieces of rock flew up and began to circle around Linley's head. These five rocks were all covered with earthen specks of light, and as Linley's eyes began to shine, he let out a deep shout. The five rocks rapidly shot off to a far distance, carrying a gust of wind with them.

"SMASH!"

The five stones covered in earthen light smashed into a thick tree trunk. The tree swayed, but its trunk did not shatter. In the end, the five stones still came tumbling down to the ground.

"Yeah, not bad." Doehring Cowart's eyes lit up. "To be able to control five stones at once with such impressive speed shows that you do, in fact, have the power of a magus of the second rank." Doehring Cowart was very much satisfied with Linley's performance.

Linley couldn't help but reveal a hint of a smile on his face as well.

He had just taken another step towards his goals.

Linley would never be able to forget the words his father had said to him when he left. "If you cannot bring it back, even when I die, I won't forgive you!" These words had pierced Linley's heart like a sharp knife, and he was constantly reminded of them.

Right now, Doehring Cowart was chortling happily. "But Linley, you must understand that a magus of the second rank counts for little. Based on our ranking systems, magi of the first and second rank are all considered 'entry-level magi'. Magi of the third and fourth ranks are considered 'mid-level magi', and fifth and sixth ranks are 'high-level magi'. A magus of the seventh rank is called a 'senior magus', a magus of the eighth rank is a 'master magus', and a magus of the ninth rank is a 'arch magus'. These ranks of seven through nine are the highest. The road you have to travel is a long way."

"I know." Linley nodded.

"Good. Train hard." Doehring Cowart once more entered the Coiling Dragon Ring.

Linley collected himself, suppressing his excitement at becoming a magus of the second rank. He once more tranquillised sat and entered the meditative trance. The strong became strong one step at a time and through achieving many accomplishments.

Approximately three kilometers away from Linley.

Linley's wind-style magus instructor, the sixth-ranked magus Trey, frowned. "Hmm, the earth magic spell, 'Shattered Rocks'? Based on its power, it should be of the second rank. An entry-level magus has come to the mountain to train? Who is it?"

Just then, Trey had utilized the 'Windscout' spell, and had sensed the earth-style magic which Linley had just cast.

Based on the magic vibrations, Trey was able to determine what spell it was.

Trey curiously walked in that direction. Based on his prowess as a magus of the sixth rank, his execution of the 'Supersonic' spell was far stronger than that of Linley's. Like a passing fog or cloud, Trey easily and tranquilly flowed through the mountain.

In the blink of an eye, Trey had reached a spot two hundred meters next to Linley.

Standing next to a large tree, Trey saw Linley from afar.

"It's him?"

Naturally, Trey recognized his own student. "This kid called Linley never talks in class. Even when experimenting in new spells, others will try them out, but he will just stand and watch from afar, never showing his strength. It seems...this kid called Linley is already a magus of the second rank. I remember him being one of our new students. Didn't expect him to be so talented."

Linley already knew how to cast spells, so of course when the instructors told the other students to give it a try, he would just stand and watch.

Never participating in any group activities, Linley's secretiveness was acknowledged by everyone who knew him.

"Hehe, looks like I have a genius amongst my students. Mm. Looks like this year, I should receive a reward when the first grade student competition commences." A

brilliant smile was on Trey's face. As for Linley, right now, being in a meditative trance, he couldn't sense anything more than a hundred meters away from him.

Chapter 18- A Learning Period (part 2)

A month had passed after Linley had become a magus of the second rank.

Within the first grade wind magic classroom.

Linley would only go to the earth magic class once every month or so, but he attended every single wind magic class. Today, Linley was seated in his usual spot.

"Linley, you came." Just as Linley sat down, a very adorable young lady sat down next to him.

Seeing the girl, Linley smiled. "Delia, you came pretty early. There's still quite some time before the next class starts." Sitting together with a beautiful girl was of course something enjoyable. Naturally, Linley wouldn't push her away.

Delia was no ordinary person.

Her brother, Dixie, was the number one genius of the entire Ernst Institute, and described as a talent which would be found once in a century at most. He, too, was a dual element mage, and his elemental essence affinity was exceptional. But what's more, he was a supreme talent with 68 times the spiritual essence of an ordinary person.

As the sister of Dixie, Delia naturally was pretty exceptional as well.

"It's because I know you always come early." Delia beamed, her eyes crinkling.

The two sat together and chatted. Time passed quite quickly, and before they realized it, class had started. Instructor Trey energetically explained in front, and Linley sat beneath him, listening intently. But Delia, every so often, would sneak a peek at Linley.

"Alright, today's class is over for now. But before class ends, there's something I must inform you all about." Instructor Trey smiled as he spoke.

All of the students immediately began to buzz.

"The older students all know that our Ernst Institute has a tradition. At the last two months of every year, a yearly tournament will be held. The yearly tournament is always the most noisy, energetic time at the Ernst Institute. The students who achieve victory in the yearly tournament will likely have a higher chance of being rated 'superior' upon their graduation. When they graduate, most likely they will be invited by the Four Great Empires." Instructor Trey laughed.

All of the students below immediately began to grow excited.

At the Ernst Institute, talents were as common as the clouds. And the number one problem that all talents shared was that they didn't like to admit inferiority to others!

Thus, the yearly tournament had become a way for talents to become famous. Close to 90% of the students would pay attention to the tournament, and everyone with some ability would participate.

"Naturally, we wind magic practitioners will also do battle. Everyone interested in enrolling, please speak to me." Instructor Trey smiled as he spoke, but his gaze drifted towards Linley.

"Instructor, I wish to enroll." Many students below immediately began to clamor to enroll.

"Great." Instructor Trey took out a duck feather quill pen and began to record down names, but after taking down ten or so names, he realized that Linley was busy chatting with Delia, apparently not interested in enrolling at all.

Trey walked over.

Linley involuntarily glanced up and immediately called out respectfully, "Instructor Trey." The nearby Delia also paid her respects.

Trey smiled and nodded. "Linley, this yearly tournament is an excellent opportunity to train one's self. I expect all of the elites of the first grade students will attend. Why aren't you enrolling? This is a rare opportunity."

"I'm not interested." Linley said directly.

Instructor Trey couldn't help but start.

"Linley, you no doubt are unaware that the victors of the tournament will receive some rewards." Instructor Trey said enticingly.

"Rewards?" Linley was in desperate need of money.

His clan's economic situation was in such terrible shape. If he could win some money, he wouldn't mind attending the yearly tournament.

"Right. You should know that most students live in ordinary dorms, those single unit ones. But the top three victors of the tournament are all qualified to live in those two-story high buildings for a year. That's a proof of status. The rooms are much more comfortable as well." Instructor Trey continued.

Linley understood.

There weren't many two-floor dorms, and most of those belonged to powerful magi of the seventh or eighth ranks. From what he was now hearing, the top three students in each grade also were allowed to live in them.

Housing conditions?

Linley didn't care about it at all.

"I'm not attending." Linley still said.

Instructor Trey grew somewhat impatient. As a sixth grade student, if one of Trey's student became one of the top three in his grade, not only would he be rewarded, he would also gain a lot of face. Young people all cared about face.

Instructor Trey leaned in towards Linley, saying in a low voice, "Linley, are you concerned about revealing your ability? I know that you are a magus of the second rank."

Hearing these words, Linley couldn't help but look up at Trey in surprise.

How did Instructor Trey learn about his current level of power? After all, it was hard to judge one's abilities from external appearances.

Seeing the expression on Linley's face, Instructor Trey thought that he had hit the mark. Laughing, he said, "Linley, if you have ability, you shouldn't hide it. Even if you decide not to attend the competition for fear of revealing your ability, I might just decide to expose you myself."

"Whatever. Still not going."

Linley stood up unhappily, and then politely paid his respects. "Farewell, instructor."

And then, ignoring the stupefied look on Trey's face, he immediately left.

“Bah. This kid.” After recovering, Trey couldn’t help but laugh. The nearby Delia couldn’t help but cover her mouth and giggle as well.

.....

By the time the wind magic class had ended, it was almost six at night. The sky was growing dark. Linley ran back towards his dorm. The bros of dorm 1987 shared strong affection towards each other, and at night they always ate together.

“Linley, you’re back.” A curly haired youngster from dorm 1986 said warmly to Linley.

“Harry [Ha’li], have you eaten dinner?” Linley smiled back in response.

Linley was on excellent relations with most of the nearby neighbors. Harry laughed and nodded. “Of course I have. Your three bros are all waiting for you inside.”

“Linley’s back. Let’s go, everyone, time to eat!” Yale’s voice sounded out.

Clearly, from inside their dorm, Yale had heard Linley’s voice. Yale, Reynolds, and George all walked out and waved to Linley. The four bros proceeded towards the dining areas. The Ernst Institute contained some luxurious restaurants, but after being persuaded by Linley, Reynolds, and George, Yale no longer took them to those places.

The dishes in the small dining hall were simple and fresh, very pleasing to eat.

After ordering some food, the four bros began to chat amongst themselves.

Linley got most of his news regarding the Institute’s going-ons from his three bros, as Linley, who spent all his time training in the mountain, probably would be totally in the dark otherwise.

“Man, in about a month, the school year is coming to an end. The last two months of each year, the entire Institute will engage in the yearly tournament. The top three students in each grade are all allowed to live in those two-story dorms for a year.” Yale said.

“The yearly tournaments?” Linley began to laugh. He had just heard about this from the classroom.

“Haha, I’m definitely attending,” Reynolds said confidently.

Yale pursed his lips. "Punk, you became a magus of the first rank on the road from the O'Brien Empire to the Ernst Institute. I wager that by now, you aren't too off from becoming the magus of the second rank. That really is unfair."

Reynolds spent a full year traveling from his home to come here.

On the entire journey, Reynolds' family housekeeper had been teaching him magic, which is why he had become a magus of the first rank even before the journey ended.

George smiled towards Linley. "Hah, you are forgetting about Linley. Linley was a magus of the first rank by the time he entered the Institute as well. What's more, he's crazy about training, and he's a dual-element magus. I think he's probably the strongest person in our dorm."

Linley quirked his lips in a smile. "George, don't flatter me."

"Linley, have you gained your second rank yet? Be honest?" George stared at Linley.

"How could he gain his second rank so quickly? From an introductory student to the first rank, based on our talent, a year is necessary. But from the first rank to the second rank, at least two years is needed." The nearby Reynolds frowned as he spoke.

"Not necessarily. I also feel Linley's been really sneaky." Yale also looked at Linley. "Linley, have you become a magus of the second rank?"

Linley casually nodded.

What was the big deal about becoming a magus of the second rank? Even before the magus testing event, he had already become a magus of the first rank. A full year had passed since then. If he still had not become a magus of the second rank, then all his hard work would've been totally pointless.

"You really reached it?" Yale, Reynolds, and George's eyes all bulged out. None of them expected it to be true.

"Go enlist in the yearly tournament, Linley. You've gotta take part. Give those guys a good trampling and gain some prestige for dorm 1987." Yale immediately said.

By now, the servers had brought the dishes they ordered.

"Eat, eat! I'm not interested in the yearly tournament." Linley had no interest in competing with those weaker than himself. Those tournament battles were nothing more than exercises in showing off!

Yale and the other three traded glances.

They all knew how hard Linley trained. Although in their year, there were geniuses who had exceptional levels of elemental affinity and spiritual essence, in terms of being hard-working, none of them could match Linley. And with Linley being dual-element...in their hearts, all of them believed that Linley was most likely the most powerful amongst the first grade students.

"It would be such a waste if you didn't participate. Someone else is going to get the glory, once again, in the yearly tournament." Yale mumbled. "Too bad I'm not strong enough. If I had your strength, Linley, I would've given a dazzling display long ago. Then, I would be able to seduce some pretty girls."

Linley laughed. "That's enough. Let's eat. Stop fantasizing."

Linley really didn't care about the yearly tournament in the slightest. But the vast majority of the students at the Ernst Institute were extremely excited about it. And not just the students. Even some of the full magi residing at the Ernst Institute would pay close attention to the tournament results.

Chapter 19 – Who is Number One? (part 1)

The mountain behind the Ernst Institute, a place of tranquility.

Linley sat cross-legged next to flowing water. Listening to the murmurs of the water, he naturally entered the meditative trance, and all the nearby earth essence and wind essence immediately began to shine. Everything within ten or so meters around Linley became extremely clear to behold.

Earth and wind essence entered his body through his four limbs, as his flesh, bones, and organs all slowly absorbed nourishment from the essences. Slowly but resolutely, the strength of his body was continuing to climb.

Additionally, a large portion of the wind and earth essences, after purification, came to rest with the 'central dantian' in the middle of his chest.

"Splash, splash." The flowing water murmured unceasingly.

Next to him, the little Shadowmouse, 'Bebe', was chewing on a wild duck. The scene was as peaceful as a painting, as though it had come out of a painting.

But while it was peaceful here, the Ernst Institute was extremely rowdy. All of the thousands of students, as well as many of the magi, and even many important people from the outside world were all at the Ernst Institute, watching the various battles.

The yearly tournament.

All of the students of the Ernst Institute were prideful heaven-blessed talents!

Each and every single battle was amazing to behold. Amongst the first grade students, balls of earth, flashes of lightning, and blades of wind flew hither and to. But the battles of the third and fourth grade students were really astounding. Various supportive spells and area of effect spells were used. Spells such as 'Shattered Rocks' now caused dozens, approaching a hundred, of large stones to smash upon the heads of the opponents, and lightning forked down without stopping.

And the fifth and sixth graders? That was all the more terrifying.

All sorts of astounding spells continuously flashed, filling the compound with unending sounds of explosions. The watching students all were all roaring nonstop, as the energy was reaching a crescendo. Virtually all of the people in the Institute were here.

.....

The yearly tournament went on for a bit over a month, which naturally was the wildest, most rowdy month each year at the Ernst Institute. During this frenetic period, Linley would only occasionally watch the battles of the fifth and sixth grade students. All of the rest of his time, he would quietly train by himself.

"This tournament actually requires one to not intentionally try and kill one's opponent. How can this sort of competition be considered a real competition, when one's hands and feet are tied?"

Under the influence of Doehring Cowart, Linley, too, began to view the competition with disdain.

"Linley, your current assignment is to train hard and build up your strength. As far as combat experience goes, when you become a magus of the fifth rank, you should enter the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts and enter a series of genuine life-and-death experiences." Doehring Cowart persuaded Linley.

.....

The Huadeli Hotel, the most expensive hotel and restaurant within the Ernst Institute. Tonight, Yale was hosting the four bros of dorm 1987 to a lavish meal at the Huadeli Hotel.

On the first floor of the Huadeli hotel.

The floor of the hotel was as slick as a mirror. A row of beautiful waitresses stood there politely, ready to answer at a moment's notice.

There were many men and women dressed in student attire at the Huadeli Hotel. Those who were able to afford this place were generally those who had strong economic backgrounds. A casual table of dishes might cost a few dozen gold coins. If Linley had come by himself, he definitely wouldn't be able to afford it.

The yearly tournament had just ended, and all of the students at the hotel were discussing it. Most of the people here were youngsters, but one table was filled with four children.

"I'm pissed just thinking about this year's competition. It was so close! I was so close to entering the semifinals. Maybe I would've been able to enter the top three." Reynolds was extremely dissatisfied. Reynolds was the youngest of the four, and also the proudest of them.

Yale laughed. "It really was a shame. I didn't expect Rand [Lan'de] to become number one in the end."

George chuckled but didn't speak.

George was a friendly fellow and offended almost nobody.

"Rand? Right. I've heard you guys discuss him before. He was one of the new students who had exceptional elemental affinity and spiritual essence, right?" Linley remembered the name 'Rand'.

George laughed and nodded. "Right, him. He has very high talent. Even before training, his spiritual essence had reached the level of a magus of the second rank. All he did this year was accumulate sufficient mageforce. It isn't too hard for someone with the power of a magus of the second rank to become number one in the tournament amongst first grade students."

"Relying on his talent alone? When it comes to talent, can he compare to our Institute's number one genius, Dixie?" Yale quirked his lips. "I look down upon Rand. He won the first grade tournament, so what. Linley, you didn't see how self-

satisfied he looked upon winning. I really can't imagine how he would look if he actually were to win the fifth or sixth grade tournaments in the future."

The stronger a magus became, the harder it was to progress even further.

This was why the large majority of students at the Ernst Institute were high-level magi. The higher one's grade was, the more fierce the competition was.

Reynolds nodded as well. "I also don't like him. Our school's number one genius, the third grader Dixie, won the third grade tournament. Look at how composed he was! The difference between the two is too huge. What's more, the strongest amongst us first graders isn't Rand."

"Right. Third bro, you didn't participate. If you had, hmph..." Yale harrumphed.

Based on age and seniority, the four of them had begun to address each other as 'second bro', 'third bro', and so on.

"Hey, what are you guys saying?"

Linley and Yale turned their heads. Four youths in the same hotel were making their way down from the second floor. Their leader, a golden-haired youth, stared at Linley's group coldly.

Yale said loudly, "Oh, so it's Rand. What, didn't you hear what we were saying?"

Linley couldn't help but laugh helplessly to himself.

Yale feared neither heaven nor hell, and cared tremendously about face.

"Hmph, don't think I didn't hear," Rand said coldly.

The brown-haired youth next to Rand sneered as well. He arrogantly said, "Rand, don't quibble with these four useless things. It's not worth your time. Reynolds, what do you think you are looking at? What, you aren't satisfied with the way you lost in the tournament?"

Reynolds stared at the brown-haired youth, his mouth quirking in disdain. "And what do you think you are? You just got lucky and beat me once. Why so cocky?"

The brown-haired youth's face grew cold.

George smiled at everyone. "Rand, enough. It was wrong of us to so casually discuss you. Let's just forget about it."

"Shut your mouth, George. This is none of your business." Rand stared at Yale.
"Yale, last time I saw you at the Fragrant Elm bar, your arrogant manner pissed me off. And now, this time, you dare to be so arrogant in front of me. If you have the ability, come and fight me. Why don't you have the balls to fight?"

After speaking, Rand intentionally laughed mockingly a few times.

Although Yale was somewhat furious, he knew that he wasn't as strong as the opponent.

Immediately, many gazes from all over the hotel focused on this altercation. Many of the high-level students of the Ernst Institute stood up and stared at the two parties with curiosity. Clearly, both parties were just ten year olds.

"I know that golden-haired kid. His name is Rand. He won the yearly tournament amongst first graders. I expect in the future, he'll have some accomplishments."

"The brown-haired kid next to him is called Rickson [Rui'sen]. He was number three amongst the first graders. I know him. In terms of strength, Rand's party is stronger than their opponents. This should be fun."

The group of magi of the fifth and sixth ranks all chatted and laughed, watching the two parties.

Seeing others notice him, and hearing them praise him as the winner of the first grade tournament, Rand's face became even more arrogant, and he looked at Linley and the others even more contemptuously.

"Hmph." Rand glanced at the table where Linley and the others were sitting. "Juice? You guys are still drinking juice? Oh, Yale, I really feel embarrassed for you. The four bros of my dorm are all drinking victory wine. You guys are drinking juice?"

Seeing how Rand went on endlessly, Linley couldn't help but begin to frown.

"Rand, we four bros are eating here. Get the hell out." Linley's face sank down, and he stared coldly at the four of them.

If he was training and was disturbed by beasts, he would immediately kill them.

"Oh, and this one." Rand's eyes shone as he stared at Linley. "How come I never knew that in Yale's dorm, there was someone such as you?"

Linleys' gaze grew cold.

Like a wild rabbit, he shot forward with incredible speed. Rand's eyes only had time to widen. "You-!" Before he could even react, Linley grabbed Rand by the chest and, just based on physical strength, hoisted him in the air.

"Wha, uh, uh..." Rand couldn't make any noises come from his throat, and his eyes were filled with fear.

Linley stared coldly at Rand. Rand, heart filled with fear, felt as though he would be killed at any moment.

At this moment, Linley felt the Dragonblood in his veins begin to blaze, as his bloodthirsty nature began to awaken. Linley couldn't help but frown as he tried to calm down. "This is the Ernst Institute. I can't kill someone for no reason."

The three students next to Rand were all stupefied and frightened as well.

"Fuck off!"

With the wave of an arm, Linley slammed Rand to the floor, as though he were nothing more than a beanbag.

Chapter 20- Who is Number One? (part 2)

By now, Linley had nearly reached the peak of the second rank for warriors. Given that the strength of an ordinary warrior of the first rank was enough to raise a hundred pounds, a warrior of the second rank could casually throw about hundred pound objects.

"You...cough...cough..." Holding his throat, Rand coughed a few times, and then stared furiously at Linley. "You...you actually..."

"Yeah!" Yale suddenly shouted loudly, his face filled with excitement. "That felt so good. Third bro, I didn't expect you to be as strong as that!"

"That kid is pretty small, but he is so strong..."

Those magi of the fifth and sixth ranks were all astonished. There were some magus instructors in the hotel as well, and all of them were staring at Linley with surprise.

A kid who appeared to be perhaps twelve or thirteen years old was able to casually toss a 90 pound person with one hand.

And this youth was a magus!

"Hey, Rand, weren't you bragging about how you were number one amongst the first graders?" Yale mocked.

Rand's face went red, as his heart was filled with fury and shame. Staring at Linley, he shouted fiercely, "You, are you a magus? If you have the skills, compete with me using magic. What sort of behavior was that? A noble magus actually used the lowly skills of a warrior." Rand was filled with anger and humiliation. He had just won the yearly tournament for the first graders, but just now, when Linley seized him by the throat and hoisted him up, he had been filled with the terrifying sense that his life was in the hands of another.

"Right, if you have the skills, compete using magic! Are you even a student of the Ernst Institute?" Rand's nearby friends immediately called out in support.

But towards Linley, the four of them felt some dread in their hearts. Linley's astonishing display of strength just now had shocked them.

"Magic?"

Reynolds immediately began to laugh loudly, as he said arrogantly, "Rand, do you actually believe that just because you won the first grade tournament, you really are the strongest amongst the first graders? Dream on. The number one first grader is our dorm's third bro. You? Step off to the side."

"Third bro, show'm a bit of your power." Yale urged as well.

George had just been yelled at by Rand, so right now, he was in no mood to give Rand any face either. "Rand, let me tell you something. Know your own limits. Many of the experts in our school simply don't deign to participate in the yearly tournament. Don't really believe that you are something special."

Rand's face grew uglier and uglier.

"You'll know the truth upon dueling. Rand, compete with them." Those fifth and sixth grade students called out laughingly. They viewed the struggles of the first graders as nothing more than an amusing diversion.

Rand was just ten years old, after all, and had been called a genius since he was little.

Even at the Ernst Institute, he was amongst the top tier. When had he ever suffered such humiliation?

“Number one?” Rand ground out. “Number one isn’t something that is simply proclaimed. It comes through competition. If you have the ability, then come duel with me.” Rand was very confident in his magical ability. After all, he had won the yearly tournament for first graders.”

“Hey, why isn’t the manager of this hotel coming in to calm things down?” Some of the onlookers felt surprised and curious about this.

In fact, the Huadeli hotel manager was standing far away, but he didn’t want to interfere.

Because he recognized these students.

Even aside from the fact that these were students from the Ernst Institute, based on the status of these students, he didn’t want to anger them. Especially...Yale.

“Young master Yale is here? Ugh. Forget it. He can do as he wishes. Even if he smashes the entire hotel, it’s none of my business.” The hotel manager rubbed and shook his head helplessly. He couldn’t dare to offend young master Yale.

And upon entering the Ernst Institute, Yale’s status amongst his family had only increased even more.

“Well spoken. Number one isn’t self-proclaimed. It’s won.” Linley stood up as well, his face cold as he stared at Rand. “Rand, if we are going to engage in a magical duel, let’s make it exciting. If you win, when I see you in the future, I’ll have to take the long way and avoid crossing paths with you. If I win, you need to do the same.”

Rand couldn’t help but sneer, “You call that exciting? When the loser meets the winner, not only does he have to take the long way around, he also has to give a hundred gold coins. How about that?”

Linley frowned.

A hundred gold coins?

He only had a hundred gold coins each year for living expenses. He wasn’t rich like some people.

“Haha! Rand, just a hundred gold coins? Aren’t you embarrassed, saying such a number? How about this. Loser pays ten thousand gold. Deal?” The nearby Yale said loudly.

“Ten thousand gold?”

Upon hearing these words, many students in the hotel sucked in a cold breath. Ten thousand gold coins was not a small sum. There were perhaps only a very few number of students in the hotel who could so casually, calmly bring out such a large sum.

“Ten thousand gold?” Rand couldn’t help but feel his heart shake.

Although his clan was a large one, each year, he only received three thousand gold in living expenses. He didn’t come spend money at the Huadeli Hotel every day. Today, he only came to celebrate him and Rickson becoming the number one and number three victors of the tournament.

“Haha, don’t have the balls?” Yale pulled out a magicard, waving it around as he spoke.

“Rand, agree to him.” Rickson said. “We four bros should be able to pool together ten thousand gold coins. I refuse to believe that this little punk who came out of nowhere can be a match for you.”

Rand and his three bros glanced at each other.

“Fine! Ten thousand gold it is!”

Rand said loudly, and then sneered towards Linley, “Let’s go. This place is too small. We’ll go to the arena where the tournament was held. If you have courage, follow me!” After speaking, Rand arrogantly left the hotel, and his three bros followed him.

“Let’s go.” Yale’s eyes were shining.

Reynolds and George were also excited. Linley nodded as well as he calmly chuckled, “Someone wants to give us ten thousand gold? How can we refuse?”

Linley, Yale, Reynolds, and George all left the hotel as well, directly heading for the arena.

The entire hotel was now in an uproar. A duel with a ten thousand gold coin wager on it was rarely seen, even by sixth grade students. And what’s more, of the duelists, one was the person who had just won the yearly tournament for first graders, Rand, and one was a mysterious kid that no one knew.

Immediately, many people paid their tabs and headed off in that direction as well.

....

The arena floor was made of limestone and extremely sturdy.

Right now, Rand and Linley were each standing on a separate side of an arena dueling area.

Beneath the upraised dueling area was a large group of people. After all, this was dinnertime, so on the way here from the Huadeli Hotel, one person became ten, and ten became a hundred. In a short period of time, a large group of people had been gathered. This exciting duel with a ten thousand gold wager was more than enough to attract many onlookers.

Seeing how many people had come and how noisy it had become, a look of confidence appeared on Rand's face.

"Today, I am going to engage in a magical duel with this kid Linley, with the loser paying ten thousand gold coins and having to avoid the other in the future. Everyone, please be my witnesses." Rand said. He enjoyed the feeling of being watched by many. He didn't suffer from any stage fright at all.

Immediately, many cheers exploded from below. During the yearly tournament, Rand had many supporters, while in contrast, very few people were supporting Linley.

But Linley just stood there on the dueling area quietly.

"Said enough?" Linley said calmly.

Rand smiled arrogantly. "Let's go."

Rand and Linley almost simultaneously began to chant the words to a spell. As both were magi of the second rank, the spells they used were all of the first and second rank and were easy to cast, requiring just a word or two.

"Whoosh!"

Seven sharp blades of wind sprang into existence, slicing directly towards Rand.

"A magus of the second rank?" The experienced onlookers could immediately tell.

But Rand had released a spell at the same time, and five balls of dull red flame shot towards Linley as well. The blades of wind were much faster than the fireballs, however, and Rand was forced to dodge in a rather sorry fashion. But Linley casually and effectively sidestepped the fireballs. And, while doing so, Linley's lips continued to move as he executed his second spell.

Earth style magic – Earth Tremor!

“Rumble....”

Rand felt the limestone beneath his feet begin to tremble violently. Under these circumstances, Rand couldn't focus enough to chant any spells. Immediately afterwards, Linley released his third spell, and five fists of earthen-colored stone shot out rapidly towards him.

Rand couldn't even maintain his footing on the shaking earth. He just barely dodged two of the stones.

“Thud.”

One stone smashed into Rand's stomach, immediately causing him to vomit fresh blood. Rand hurriedly used his arms to cover his chest. Two more striking sounds were heard, and Rand was directly thrown off the dueling area, his entire body covered with dust.

Magic duel, Linley, victorious!

Linley calmly glanced at Rand once. Linley was very clear about the attack he had just used. With just a month's recovery time at most, Rand would be fine. If he, Linley, had decided to be merciless, he could have directed the stones at Rand's head and most likely finished him.

“A dual-element magus of the second rank. We have such an expert amongst us first graders?”

The onlooking first graders called out, astonished. For a second rank magus to appear amongst the first graders was a rare event, much less a dual-element magus, who would be the absolute strongest amongst them.

“This kid controlled his mageforce very precisely, and his body movements were very nimble.”

Some of the fifth and sixth graders were a bit surprised. Just now, when facing the fireballs, Linley had been able to dodge while continuing to chant the words to a spell. From this one could tell how agile Linley was.

“Haha, Rand, did you really think you were number one? Our dorm's third bro, just using magic, is still able to easily trample you.” Yale laughed loudly.

“Cough, cough.” Rand stood up, clutching his chest.

Rand knew in his heart that just then, Linley had shown mercy.

“Yale, tomorrow, bring Linley. I’ll go with you to the Golden Bank of the Four Empires local branch to transfer money. Ten thousand golds. I’ll keep my word.” Rand took a long look at the distant Linley. This defeat at Linley’s hands had totally woken Rand up from the arrogant haze of being a genius.

Even if one was talented, if one wasn’t strong enough, he would still be defeated by others!

“Linley, thank you!” Rand said, bowing, causing Yale and others to be startled. And then, Rand stared at Linley and said resolutely, “But there will come a day when I will defeat you.”

And then Rand, still clutching his chest, left with the help of his bros, returning to his own residence.

“Linley, you are too awesome. You won your bros a lot of face!” Reynolds immediately ran over and embraced Linley, who had stepped down.

Linley glanced around.

Many people were now staring at him and discussing him. Most of the talented people at the Ernst Institute had become well-known already. Nobody expected such an individual to appear out of nowhere amongst the first graders and easily defeat Rand, the tournament champion.

“Hi Linley, my name is Danni [Dan’ni], a water magus of the first rank. I’m glad to meet you.” Immediately, a golden-haired girl with a tall, slender figure walked over and said to Linley with a smile.

“Hi, my name is Linley.” Linley didn’t have the habit of talking to strangers much. “Sorry, I’m going to go train and enter the meditative trance now.”

After speaking, Linley glanced expressively at his three bros. Yale and the others knew what he was thinking, and immediately, the four bros ignored everyone around them and departed, leaving behind that young lady, Danni, who frowned unhappily.

Chapter 21 – The Proulx Gallery (part 1)

The Golden Bank of the Four Empires was a bank that had been jointly established by the Yulan continent’s Four Great Empires. People who were capable of opening a magicrystal card account with the bank were undoubtedly people of great wealth.

Given that the card itself cost a hundred gold coins, normal people wouldn't be willing to part with such a high sum.

Ten thousand gold coins, if divided into hand-sized pouches, would fill a hundred pouches. Even a burlap rice sack would be half-filled and very heavy.

"A hundred gold coins, gone like that." Walking out from the local branch of the Golden Bank of the Four Empires within the Ernst Institute, Linley couldn't help but sigh to himself. Now, next to his chest, was a magicrystal card of his own.

Linley knew that while he continued to live at the Ernst Institute, if he put a huge pile of gold coins in his dorm, it wouldn't be safe. The safest option was to put them all in a magicrystal card.

It must be known that the cost to create the card was not low. It had taken master goldsmiths centuries to develop, and each card responded to the fingerprints of its owner alone. Thus, every single magicrystal card could only be used by its original owner.

This was the reason why magicrystal cards cost a hundred gold coins.

"With these ten thousand gold coins, my living expenses at the Ernst Institute will be more than sufficiently covered, with lots left over. I can help father as well." Linley felt very happy.

Yale's arm was around Linley's shoulders, and he whistled a little tune while delightedly peering at the nearby Rand and his bros.

Rand and the other three had taken out their living expenses money, and the four of them had perhaps only a thousand gold coins left. But fortunately, the school year was about to end.

Reynolds and George were both calmly smiling as well, and were joking with Linley to the side.

But in truth, neither Reynolds nor George had suffered much in the past.

"Second bro, third bro, fourth bro, tomorrow, at the end of the month, my father will come over. At that time, I will arrange for carriages and guardsmen to be brought over. Where should we four bros travel to?" Yale suggested.

"The Holy Capital?"

Reynolds, George, and Linley's eyes all shone.

Fenlai City, the Holy Capital, was no ordinary city.

"The Holy Capital is a great idea. On the way here from the O'Brien Empire, I stayed at Fenlai City for two days. I haven't had a chance to visit many places yet." Reynolds hurriedly said.

George and Linley both nodded.

"The Holy Capital has lots of places to visit. Tomorrow, I'll take you guys out and expand your horizons." Yale said mysteriously.

.....

At dawn the next day, Yale and the others all had breakfast together, and then directly went to the Ernst Institute's main gate and began waiting for Yale's escorted carriage.

After waiting for two hours, the carriage still had not arrived.

"Squeak squeak." Bebe, perched on Linley's shoulder, began to squeak.

"Bebe is getting impatient. Yale, you pulled us all here early in the morning, but the carriage still hasn't come." Reynolds said unhappily, while Yale laughed apologetically. "I don't know either, they should be here by now." Linley just stroked Bebe's little head.

"There they are." Yale suddenly shouted loudly.

George, Reynolds, and Linley, all of whom had almost fallen asleep, turned to look. From afar, there really was four carriages and hundreds of mounted guardsmen hurrying towards them en masse. Above the formation, there were even seven or eight Griffons, and of the hundreds of riders, over ten were riding magical beasts such as the Vampiric Iron Bull or Windwolves.

"So Yale's clanguard divisions are so formidable," Linley couldn't help but feel shocked. The eyes of Reynolds and George also shone.

Doehring Cowart was seated next to Linley, enjoying the sun. Upon seeing the cavalry division, his eyes lit up as well. Very shortly, the four carriages and hundreds of riders arrived at the main gate. Three magi came out to greet them at the gate.

A middle aged man stepped forward in front of the four carriages. Before even speaking to the three magi, he strode towards Yale.

“Second Uncle, what took you guys so long?” Yale said unhappily.

This ‘Second Uncle’ of Yale’s immediately laughed and said, “Haha, did you grow impatient? Alright, your carriages are all ready. The last one is filled with some goods, I’ll have them clear them out so you have a place to sit. You are going to the Holy Capital, right?”

“Cass [Ka’qi], take three others with you. You are responsible for protecting young master Yale.” This ‘Second Uncle’ ordered.

Off in the distance, a bald rider immediately dismounted, walked in front of Yale, and bowed. “Cass pays his respects to young master Yale.”

Next to Linley, Doebling Cowart’s eyes lit up and he said to him, “Linley, this brother of yours definitely is extraordinary. Based on how he dismounted and his eyes, I can feel that this Cass is an expert who is a good deal stronger than even your Uncle Hillman. In addition, that hawk on his shoulder should be a magical beast of the seventh rank – the “Blue-eyed Thunderhawk.”

For Cass to be praised by Doebling Cowart as an ‘expert’ meant that he definitely was out of the ordinary.

“Linley, let’s go. Enter the carriage quickly. Let’s go to the Holy Capital.” Yale beckoned.

Linley and the other three entered the carriage together. The interior was very spacious, and the four of them weren’t cramped at all. Immediately, the carriage driver began heading towards the direction of the Fenlai City, the Holy Capital.

Cass and the other three riders all followed from behind.

In the cabinets within the carriage, there were actually fruits, honey, and wine. The four brothers began to eat and drink and chat within the carriage. The Ernst Institute was only twenty kilometers away from Fenlai City, so after about half an hour or so, they arrived.

They left the carriage.

Under the protection of Cass and the other three, Linley’s group began to roam Fenlai City.

“Hey, where is everyone going? Fenlai City has an incredible amount of places to have fun. East Fenlai City has lots of luxurious places to spend money with lots of

beautiful waitresses, while West Fenlai City has many art museums, such as the famous Proulx Gallery." Yale was very familiar with Fenlai City.

"Beautiful waitresses? Okay okay, let's go to East Fenlai City." The eyes of that mischievous scamp Reynolds had begun to shine.

"It's only the afternoon. Those places are only fun in the evening. But of course, we can go now as well." Yale said laughingly.

Linley felt some reservations about those types of places, and so he said, "Yale, forget it, what's the point of us kids going to those places? Just now, you mentioned the Proulx Gallery? Since the Proulx Gallery names itself after the famous Grandmaster Proulx, it must be extraordinary. Let's go check it out."

Proulx, the number one sculptor in the history of the Yulan continent.

"Grandmaster Proulx? I've heard of him as well. In the past, one of his sculptures was sold for the price of several million gold coins. The name of that sculpture was 'Hope'. Millions of gold coins, my god. So rich." Reynolds sighed.

George laughed confidently. "In the history of sculpture, from the beginning til now, there have been countless stone sculptures made. Of the top ten sculptures, any one of them would be worth a million gold coins. And of those top ten sculptures, three were made by Grandmaster Proulx. He can be considered the number one person in the history of stonesculpting!"

Linley sucked in a breath of cold air.

Millions of gold coins?

What an enormous sum that was. Even if his clan sold off their ancestral home, they most likely would only be able to scrape up a hundred thousand gold coins.

"Let's go check it out." Linley immediately said.

Chapter 22- The Proulx Gallery (part 2)

The Proulx Gallery.

The number one art gallery for sculptures, each of the largest cities in the Yulan continent had a Proulx Gallery branch. The Proulx Gallery took up an extremely

large space, and a great majority of those entering the gallery were people of culture and breeding.

Within the Proulx Gallery, if you had too many ostentatious magic rings on your hands, the likely result would just be you being mocked and derided for having no class.

Art, sophistication!

This place valued these things the most.

The entry fee to the Proulx Gallery was one gold coin per person.

A ding-dong sound, as clear as the sound of a mountain spring, rang out from within the Proulx Gallery. The sound of it made listeners feel at peace. Countless people traversed the gateway, with many noblemen, noblewoman, and beautiful young girls, all dressed very tastefully.

And commoners, in front of the Proulx Gallery, would almost unconsciously comport themselves.

When Linley and his bros, along with Cass and the three guardsmen, arrived at the Proulx Gallery, anyone who was a decent judge of character could recognize the Ernst Institute clothing that they wore. Upon seeing the Blue-eyed Thunderhawk on Cass' shoulders, they naturally would become very courteous and polite.

"Uncle Cass, come in along with us. The other three can wait for us outside." Yale instructed.

Linley, his three bros, and Cass thus entered the gallery. In the main hall of the Proulx Gallery, there was a large, man-shaped sculpture. This sculpture was precisely that of the number one grandmaster sculptor, Proulx.

The entire Proulx Gallery was extremely quiet.

Virtually everyone, regardless of status, spoke in hushed tones, so as to avoid bothering anyone else.

Yale, Reynolds, George, and Linley viewed one stone sculpture after another, and in their hearts they felt as though these sculptures truly were incomparably beautiful.

"The Proulx Gallery's exhibits are divided into three halls; the main hall, the experts' hall, and the masters' hall. This main hall is filled with sculptures that some sculptors arranged to be placed here, to be valued and bought by others as they see

fit. Each work is exhibited for a month, and after a month, the highest bid wins the sculpture. These ordinary sculptures are mostly just worth a few gold coins, with particularly good ones worth a few dozen coins."

Yale laughed as he explained. "But the experts' hall is different. The experts' exhibition is divided up into many individual rooms, with each sculpture in a room by itself. Generally speaking, an 'expert' is someone whose sculpting ability has received general acclaim, and most expert sculptures are worth around a thousand gold coins or so."

"As for the masters' hall, that's even more amazing. In the innermost sanctum of the gallery, there are a very small number of masters' sculptures. The price of these sculptures is frighteningly high. Any of them are easily worth tens of thousands of gold, and some of the masterpieces which first brought fame to their master sculptors are easily worth hundreds of thousands of gold pieces." Yale explained to his three bros in detail.

Linley's breath stopped.

Any masterpiece by a master sculptor was worth tens of thousands of gold coins. To a master sculptor, money really meant nothing at all.

"But it is quite difficult for a master sculptor to produce a masterpiece, since they naturally don't want to make any mistakes at all." Yale sighed as he spoke. "A masterpiece that is worthy of being venerated throughout the ages, requires talent, ability, and sometimes a sudden spark of genius."

"The works in this main hall are just a bit pleasing to the eye, is all. Let's go inside." Yale led them deeper within.

Walking within the quiet Proulx Gallery, and listening to that peaceful music, Linley felt as though he were swimming in a sea of culture. And just at this time, Doehring Cowart flew out from within the Coiling Dragon Ring and began to appraise the art nearby.

"Terrible, terrible. How can people have the face to bring out artwork of this quality to show others?" Doehring Cowart said unhappily.

"Grandpa Doehring," Linley turned to look at Doehring Cowart. "This is just the main hall of the Proulx Gallery. There is an experts' hall up front, as well as a masters' hall."

"Proulx Gallery?" Doehring Cowart started, and then actually stopped talking.

“Grandpa Doehring, Grandpa Doehring?” Linley mentally called out a few times. But seeing that Doehring Cowart was still lost in his thoughts, Linley no longer tried to call to him. He followed Yale, Reynolds, and George to the experts’ hall. This hall really was different, as within the center of the main hall, each and every artist had their information recorded and the location of their displays recorded.

Yale, Linley, and the others began to enter the individual display rooms.

Although he didn’t know much about sculpture, Linley could still clearly feel that the sculptures of the experts were clearly different than those in the main hall. They seemed to carry within them some sort of ineffable grace and culture.

Just as Linley was falling into a reverie while enjoying the sculptures, Doehring Cowart’s voice sounded out in his mind once again.

“Not bad. These at least can be considered accomplished.” Doehring Cowart sighed with praise. “But compared to the works of Proulx, there’s still quite a way to go.”

Linley was speechless.

“Doehring Cowart, how can these people possibly compare to Grandmaster Proulx?” Linley shook his head and laughed helplessly. Proulx was the number one sculptor in the entire history of the Yulan continent.

Doehring Cowart frowned. Stroking his beard unhappily, he said, “What is it? Do you think that Proulx was a grandmaster from birth? He, too, started as an ordinary sculptor and worked his way up, and becoming a true grandmaster sculptor in the end.”

Linley was stunned.

There was some logic to Grandpa Doehring’s words.

After finishing inspecting the experts’ hall, Linley and the other three headed for the innermost masters’ hall.

“Everyone, remember, while within the masters’ hall, don’t touch anything. If you break anything, it would be disastrous.” Yale reminded them.

Entering the masters’ hall. Silence.

The masters’ hall was extremely large, but there were only very few sculptures inside. After all, only so many masters had ever existed, and each master had only

four or five works of art on display. In the entire hall, there were only twenty or thirty works on display.

But although there were very few sculptures, when Linley and the others saw these sculptures, they felt a spirit emanating from them, as though these sculptures had life.

"Oh, not bad, not bad. I didn't expect that in five thousand years, the art of stone-sculpting would reach such a height." Doehring Cowart said in amazement. "If these can improve a bit more, they will be able to approximate Proulx's level."

Silently mesmerized within the art gallery, Linley and the others felt their spirits be uplifted.

.....

Night. The Ernst Institute's main gate. Linley and other three dismounted the carriage.

"Second bro, third bro, the two of you, ugh. I planned for us to have a good time tonight in Fenlai City, but you...ugh, you guys are so thin-skinned. I started having fun in those places when I was six years old." Yale was still unhappily grumbling nonstop.

"Right on, right on," Reynolds said from the side.

George and Linley glanced at each other, and couldn't help but chuckle bitterly.

"Quick, open the gate!" A furious, urgent shout rang out.

Linley and the others couldn't help but swivel to take a look. They saw a curly-haired youth carrying another bloody youth, with a pretty girl by his side. The bloody youth's face was ashen white. His left arm was broken, with white bones sticking out, and chest covered with claw marks.

"Looks like some of the trainees who went to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts were wounded. What group is this? We haven't even been at the Ernst Institute for a year, but we've seen so many high level students who were injured outside." Yale said casually.

The Mountain Range of Magical Beasts was east of the Holy Union.

As a matter of fact, it was quite close to the Ernst Institute, perhaps just a hundred kilometers away. Generally speaking, those in good shape would be able to jog from the mountain range to the Ernst Institute in about half a day.

“Here at the Ernst Institute, I’ve seen so many magical beasts. Wow, man, there are flying beasts, running beasts, and all sorts of beasts. But most of the people who have magical beast companions at the Ernst Institute are magus instructors, and a few high level students.” George sighed in admiration.

Just as the four bros arrived at the main gate, suddenly –

“Linley.”

A familiar voice sounded out. Turning his head to look, surprised joy appeared on Linley’s face. “Uncle Hillman.”

Chapter 23 – A Wonderful Surprise

Hillman was standing in a corner near the gate. Smiling, he walked over. “The Ernst Institute has extremely strict management. They actually denied me entrance and just had a guard go looking for you. I didn’t expect you would actually be outside.”

“Yale, you guys go on ahead, I’ll join you later.” Linley turned his head and said.

Yale, George, and Reynolds all smiled at Hillman, then entered the Ernst Institute.

“Uncle Hillman, why are you here? I thought you would only come here to pick me up after the semester ends?” Linley said questioningly.

“Let’s talk over here.” Hillman pulled Linley off to a side, a look of irrepressible excitement appearing on his face. “Linley, I have wonderful news for you, extremely wonderful news.”

Linley’s eyes shone.

“What news?” Linley urged him.

Hillman smiled. “Linley, do you remember little Wharton’s date of birth?”

“Of course. January 3rd. What, does this have something to do with his birthday?” Linley questioned.

Hillman laughed. "It is December right now, so little Wharton is almost six years old. Just last night, your father tested little Wharton for the density of Dragonblood in his veins in the ancestral hall. And the test result was...haha..." Hillman once again began to laugh.

Linley's heart rate sped up dramatically.

The Dragonblood density test result was...

Could it be...

Linley asked, "Did the Dragonblood density in little Wharton's veins reach the cutoff?"

Hillman laughed loudly and nodded. "Right. Your father was absolutely ecstatic. He excitedly drank wine with me until midnight. Your father said that his two sons are the absolute prides of his life. One is a mighty magus, and the other is a Dragonblood Warrior. Haha..."

"Wonderful."

Linley's heart was full of excitement.

The five-millennium old legendary Dragonblood Warrior clan's prospects, prior to Wharton being tested for the Dragonblood density, had previously been carried on Linley's shoulders alone. The greater their former glory was, the heavier the burden Linley had been carrying.

But now....

His own little brother's Dragonblood density was sufficiently high that with just a few decades of hard work, he could become a world-renowned Dragonblood Warrior.

"I came here today to tell you this wonderful news. Your father said to me that right now, the strongest people in Wushan township are myself and him. We are both warriors of the sixth rank! Our level of expertise isn't enough to provide good tutelage for your little brother, and the training methods of your clan are written down but unclear." Hillman's face grew solemn. "Thus your father has decided to send your little brother to the O'Brien Empire's "O'Brien Academy" to study. In that mighty military Empire, in the finest military academy, your little brother will receive the best tutelage available."

Linley agreed as well.

A person who only had tremendous brute strength but lacked in technique and experience could only be considered a big, dumb ape.

“Wait.” Linley frowned as he looked at Hillman. “Uncle Hillman, that O’Brien Academy’s tuition must be extremely high. Although they will allow their own students to study free of charge, no doubt they are extremely merciless in charging out-of-empire students.” Linley clearly remembered how much Reynolds had paid to be admitted to the Ernst Institute.

Hillman nodded. “The O’Brien Academy’s yearly tuition is approximately five thousand gold coins. Your father intends to have Housekeeper Hiri escort Wharton there and take care of him. The tuition fee really is high. In ten years, it’ll be fifty thousand gold coins.”

Fifty thousand gold coins would approximately equate to the entire value of all of the Baruch clan’s possessions, if sold off.

“Right! Uncle Hillman.”

Hillman looked questioningly at Linley as he watched Linley withdraw a magicrystal card from his pockets. Hillman was shocked. “A magicrystal card?” Previously, when he was a soldier, he had seen magicrystal cards before.

“Linley, how do you have a magicrystal card? Not even your father has one.” Hillman looked at Linley with surprise.

Linley tugged Hillman and said, “I won this magicrystal card from a rich kid who lost a magic duel with me. Let’s go to the Golden Bank of the Four Empires.” Right now, the guards at the Ernst Institute’s entrance no longer attempted to bar Hillman’s passage, because they recognized Linley, who had left earlier this morning.

To Linley, this extra money didn’t have too much usage. If he could use it to help his family, that would be enough.

....

Wushan township, within the Baruch clan manor’s main hall.

Hogg was pondering.

Since his clan had produced a descendant with the requisite density of Dragonblood, he must be given the best upbringing. Even if they had to beggar themselves, it would be worth it. This was without question!

“Who should I sell the stone carving screen in the bedroom to? Philip is too stingy, he won’t give a good price.” Hogg was pondering nonstop.

The tuition needed to send little Wharton to the O’Brien Academy was astonishingly high. The question in Hogg’s mind right now was how to sell his clan’s possessions for a sufficiently high price.

Suddenly, footsteps sound out.

Turning his head, Hogg said, “Hillman, you are back. Uh, what’s that on your shoulders?”

Hillman tossed the bag across his shoulders onto the floor. The bag collided into the floor with a heavy thud sound. Clearly, it was very heavy.

“Lord Hogg, Linley asked me to bring this to you.” Hillman opened the bag and then poured everything out. One small, gold-colored sack after another formed a small mound on the floor, and the sound of gold coins clinking within the gold-colored sacks was very clear and crisp.

These gold-colored sacks were used solely by the Golden Bank of the Four Empires. Each bag generally contained a hundred gold coins.

“Gold coins? So much gold. There must be at least ten thousand gold coins here.” Hogg stared at Hillman, astonished. “Hillman, you say that Linley asked you to bring this here?”

Hillman said solemnly, “In total, nine thousand, nine hundred gold coins. Linley asked me to bring this to you. At the Ernst Institute, a rich young fellow engaged in a magical duel with Linley, and in losing, also lost ten thousand gold coins. Linley stored them into a magic crystal card, and now, has withdrawn the entire balance.”

Hillman still remembered the words that Linley had said to the attendant at the Golden Bank of the Four Empires. “Withdraw everything!”

“9900 gold coins? Linley’s?”

Staring at the mound of gold-colored sacks, Hogg immediately grew silent.

Chapter 24 – The Straight Chisel School

Many days later, at the Ernst Institute.

It was morning. Linley had eaten breakfast, and was now headed to the back mountains, preparing to begin training.

While walking on the road out of the Institute, the little Shadowmouse was on Linley's shoulders, scanning about in all directions. There were quite a few people at the Ernst Institute who had magical beast companions, and thus no one cared at all that Linley had a little Shadowmouse as a companion. But just at that moment...

"That guy is Linley, the number one magus amongst us first graders." A clear voice rang out from not too far up ahead.

Linley couldn't help but stare at the direction of the voice, and saw two cute girls chatting to each other while staring at him. When Linley glanced at them, the two girls began to titter in a quiet voice.

"I've become famous." Linley mocked himself.

Over the past few days, he would often run into people discussing him. Since he had defeated Rand, the victor of the first grade tournament, everyone had tacitly agreed that he was the number one expert amongst first graders.

"Oh, in front is?" Linley suddenly saw a slender, small frame up ahead.

Short golden hair, with a body as slender as that of Reynolds. A cold aura emanated from him as he calmly walked along the road.

"Dixie?" Linley's pupils contracted.

Dixie was nine years old as well, and in fact was actually a month younger than Linley. But this nine year old child had already become a magus of the third rank. Although it became harder and harder to progress in the higher ranks, a nine-year old magus of the third rank was still very astonishing.

"It's Dixie. I heard that yesterday at the annual magus assessment test, Dixie showed that he had already reached the requirements for the fourth rank." A number of seventeen and eighteen year old girls said from the side.

Most of the students in the third grade were more than sixteen years old, with only the genius Dixie as a clear exception!

“A magus of the fourth rank!”

Linley felt his heart violently shudder. They were both nine years old, and Dixie was even a month younger than him. But he had already become a magus of the fourth rank, while Linley was only of the second rank.

Demeanor as cold as ice, Dixie walked past Linley.

The absolute genius, Dixie. No one his age could come close to matching him.

A white line shone out of the Coiling Dragon Ring, and Doehring Cowart appeared besides Linley, smiling. “Linley, there actually isn’t a huge difference between you two. When Dixie enrolled, his spiritual essence was 68 times that of his peers. This means that even before training, his spiritual essence had reached the level of a magus of the third rank. That’s why in his first year, all he had to do was accumulate sufficient mageforce for him to become a magus of the third rank. By now, he’s been at the Ernst Institute for almost two more years, so it is very normal for him to become a magus of the fourth rank.”

Linley understood this in his heart.

This person simply had too much natural talent. He was born with tremendous spiritual essence, and he had exceptional elemental affinity as well. Clearly, he must have accumulated mageforce very quickly as well.

“Although his training speed right now is fast, I expect him to need another three or four years to advance from the fourth rank to the fifth rank. And to go from the fifth rank to the sixth rank, he will need four or five years.”

“Right now, you are a magus of the second rank, while he is of the fourth rank. But I am confident that in ten years, you will catch up to him.” Doehring Cowart said confidently.

But Linley didn’t believe it.

“Grandpa Doehring, the more natural talent one has, the faster one will progress. He has much more talent than I do, and holds two more ranks than I do. How could I possibly catch up to him in ten short years?” Linley was no fool. His studies at the Ernst Institute had made him aware of how difficult it was for a magus to advance a rank.

In the past, Doehring Cowart had told Linley that he would become a magus of the sixth rank in ten years, but Linley had always had reservations about that claim. After all, to date, his rate of improvement was clearly insufficient.

As he said these words, Linley had already left the gates of the Ernst Institute and entered the back mountains. As he passed through the mountain forests, Doebling Cowart suddenly said, "Linley, go to a place next to the mountainside."

"Next to a mountainside?" Linley was confused.

"Don't ask too many questions. When you arrive, I'll explain." Doebling Cowart laughed.

Most of the back mountain was covered with wild grass and many different large trees. But after a while, Linley found a place that satisfied Doebling Cowart's requirements. The place was a mountain peak that rose hundreds of meters into the air. At the base of the peak, Linley stood.

"Grandpa Doebling, what do you want me to do here?" Linley said questioningly.

Laughing, Doebling Cowart said, "Linley, do you disbelieve my claim that I can let you reach his level in ten short years? Haha...Linley, as a mighty Saint-level Grand Magus, I in fact am in possession of a method to improve one's spiritual essence."

"A method to improve one's spiritual essence? Isn't the meditative trance enough for that?" Linley stared at Doebling Cowart questioningly.

Doebling Cowart smiled calmly. "Linley, I will admit that the meditative trance has very good results. But after meditating, one will feel extremely tired."

"Of course I would feel tired. The meditative trance involves me using my spiritual essence non-stop. After totally exhausting my spiritual essence, I would then allow it to recover. It'd be strange if it wasn't exhausting." Linley frowned.

Doebling Cowart proudly said, "But my method is different. It doesn't cost spiritual essence at all. In fact, it is a form of entertainment."

"Entertainment?" Linley was dazed.

"Right. This form of entertainment is – stonesculpting!" A prideful look appeared on Doebling Cowart's face.

"Stonesculpting?" Linley said, astonished. "Like the sculptures in the Proulx Gallery?"

Doebling Cowart smiled and said, "Right. When others sculpt stone, they will exert a lot of energy and exhaust themselves. But my stonesculpting method is different.

Although it is also tiring when you first begin to train in it, towards the end, it will have extremely good results."

"Are you serious?" Linley couldn't quite believe it.

Doehring Cowart stared at him. "Linley, you don't believe me? As a venerable Saint-level Grand Magus of the Pouant Empire, in the past, there were several sculptures I made which nobles offered a million gold coins to purchase. But how could I, a Saint-level Grand Magus, be willing to give the sculptures which I was the most proud of to others?"

"You were that good? How come I've never heard of your name amongst the other grandmaster sculptors, then, Grandpa Doehring?" Linley said suspiciously.

Doehring Cowart said awkwardly, "Well, I hid all of my works in an underground vault which no one knew about. After five thousand years, I'm no longer even sure where it is located." Five thousand years is enough for a sea to turn into farmland. The entire Pouant Empire had been eliminated. Who knew where the vault was now?

"Oh ho, so no one's ever heard of you?" Linley began to chortle.

"You don't believe me?" Doehring Cowart stared at him. "Back in the day, when Proulx was just a young kid, he came to me and earnestly begged me to allow him to view my sculptures. After analyzing my sculptures, that kid Proulx had a mental breakthrough which in the end allowed him to become a grandmaster sculptor. As a matter of fact, he can even be considered a student of mine."

Linley was stunned.

"Proulx?" Linley was truly terrified now.

Proulx, the man who had been acclaimed throughout the ages at the finest sculptor in history, could be considered a student of Doehring Cowart.

"Of course, if one can describe Proulx's works as being in pursuit of perfection, my works are in pursuit of a different extreme. I named my sculpting method the 'Straight Chisel School'. The Straight Chisel School is totally different from all other sculpting methods. It pursues a totally different extreme. This method, in the beginning, is very exhausting, but as one masters it, you will realize its true fruits." A look of absolute confidence was on Doehring Cowart's face.

Glancing at Linley, a smile appeared on Doebling Cowart's face. "But of course, in the past, I was the only member of the Straight Chisel School. From today forward, you will be a second member."

In his heart, Linley had total confidence in Grandpa Doebling, so of course he had decided to study sculpting with him.

And what's more...

If Grandpa Doebling's words were true, and he could grow stronger while also becoming a master sculptor, just based on his sculpting skills alone, he would be able to support his little brother's tuition.

"Written, recorded history goes back only a few tens of thousands of years at most. In the long ages before then, before the writing system had even been invented, stonesculpting had already existed." Doebling Cowart said with a sigh. "Hundreds of thousands of years, or even millions of years ago, our ancestors would record their memories and their visions in sculptures. This is the most ancient method of recording culture and history."

Linley nodded as well.

There was no form of culture at all which was older than stonesculpting.

"Throughout the ages, sculpting has always been very hard to do. And creating a sculpture with a unique aura is even harder. The harder something is to do, the more valuable a success would be." Doebling Cowart sighed emotionally.

Linley agreed in his heart.

If you wanted to paint a single stroke, you could easily do so. But if you wanted to carve out a paint-stroke, it would be extremely difficult, because stone is too unyielding.

"A stone's appearance, quality, grains, and coloration impact not only its appearance, but its entire potential and true form. We use chisels to remove the excess parts and allow its natural beauty to be revealed. This is stonesculpting."

"The stonesculpting way is really a way of controlling space and appearance. When stonesculpting, one must carve from the outside to the inside, one step at a time, slowly drawing out a 'form' from within. And then, slowly, one would remove the excess parts, allowing the form to become more and more clear. This will allow the sculptor to naturally feel as though his work of art is 'evolving' beautifully.

....

Once he started, Doebling Cowart couldn't stop talking about carving.

But Linley could clearly tell how much Doebling Cowart revered this art.

"Most stonesculpting methods use many tools, such as the butterfly chisel, a straight chisel, a skew chisel, a triangular chisel, a jade bowl knife, hammers, saws, and more. The reason there are so many tools is because stone is very firm and hard. Thus, they will use a butterfly chisel to draw the form, the straight chisel for the initial cuts, the triangular chisel...."

Listening to him speak, Linley began to understand more about the basics of stonesculpting.

Doebling Cowart suddenly laughed. "But my stonesculpting method is totally different from that of others. This is because my stonesculpting method uses only a single tool – the straight chisel! This is why I have named my sculpting method, the 'Straight Chisel School'!"

"How is that possible? You carve just using a straight chisel?" Linley immediately argued. "You just said yourself that more tools are needed. For example, the scales of a fish. How would you use a straight chisel to carve that? Isn't that totally impossible?"

"Wrong. Although others cannot, we earth-style magi can!"

Doebling Cowart said confidently, "Earth-style magi can totally sense the entirety of a rock's form. With sufficient wrist strength, we can sculpt stone using just a straight chisel. But of course, the 'Straight Chisel School' is not a simple one to enter. Today, your mission is to go purchase a sufficiently sharp straight chisel. From today onwards, every day, I will spend three hours guiding you in learning how to sculpt stone."

Chapter 25 – Six Years

The flowing water continued to swirl as Linley sat cross legged next to it. In his hands, he held a straight chisel and a rock the size of his palm.

"Begin with the basics. I'll start with this little rock as I begin my training..."

Linley sat there alone in the mountains behind the Ernst Institute. Under the tutelage of Doehring Cowart, he began to study the art of stonesculpting. As he began to understand more and more about this art, Linley also began to understand why in the later stages, the Straight Chisel School could assist in improving one's spiritual essence.

When others carved, they needed to use a large pile of tools.

They had to spend a huge amount of time and mental energy just considering what tools to use where. Naturally, this would be exhausting. Every single work of art represented their blood and painstaking effort.

But the Straight Chisel School was different.

The only tool used was a straight chisel, so there was no need to consider what tool should be used for what. Naturally, the difficulty level was greatly heightened due to the use of just one tool. For example, using the straight chisel to carve out the parts normally reserved for the jade bowl knife required an extremely perfect understanding and grasp of the basic form of a stone.

In addition, great strength was needed.

If one tried to use just a straight chisel on some larger pieces which normally would require a saw to cut through, one would need sufficient strength.

One could use an earth-style magus' unique connection to the earth to understand a stone's essence. But wrist strength had to be trained. As a magus of the second rank, Linley's wrist strength was not bad, but it was only enough to carve some smaller pieces. If he wanted to carve anything large, his wrist strength would not be enough.

However...

Right now, Linley was just working on the basics.

.....

When the school year came to an end, Linley returned to Wushan township.

After the New Year, little Wharton and his older brother, Linley, had only a few days to spend in each other's company. And then, under the auspices of Housekeeper Hiri, Wharton headed towards the O'Brien Empire. Linley had no choice but to wistfully watch little Wharton depart. Crying nonstop, six year old Wharton parted from ten year old Linley and headed off.

Time passed.

Linley continued to be a solitary figure at the Ernst Institute. The vast majority of his time each day was spend in arduous training at the back mountains.

Entering a young adult's growth period, Linley's appetite increased enormously, and he began to grow taller as well. Naturally, his physical strength and musculature also improved rapidly. In the art of stonesculpting, with Doehring Cowart's guidance and his own hard work, Linley continued to make progress.

.....

Spring went, autumn came. Flowers blossomed, flowers withered. In the blink of an eye, three years passed.

At a waterfall in the mountains behind the Ernst Institute.

"Roar, roar." Like a solid sheet of water, the waterfall poured down in torrents, smashing into the deep pool of water.

Linley was right next to the waterfall, wielding a thirty-centimeter straight chisel in his hand as he constantly chipped away at a man-sized block of stone. The straight chisel in his hands danced in an almost illusionary fashion. Every place the straight chisel passed saw scraps of stone detach and fall down. An embryo of a statue was beginning to take shape from the stone.

He continued from morning until evening, and the statue's form began to grow clearer and clearer.

Linley's gaze was totally fixed upon the stone. At this moment, his entire being was focused on the stone and permeated it, as his heart had become one with the inside of the stone. This marvelous feeling caused Linley not to even notice the passage of time. This sensation of being totally one with nature actually caused Linley's spiritual energy to begin to regenerate, and even grow organically.

But Linley himself did not notice this, as he continued to wield the straight chisel and unceasingly work on the statue.

Pieces of excess stone continued to fall down, causing each detail of the statue to grow more pronounced. By the time the sun had set, the straight chisel in Linley's hands finally came to a halt.

"Whew!"

Linley let out a soft breath and brushed away some small pieces of excess stone still remaining. The entire statue had taken shape. A half-meter long lively-looking mouse stood in front of Linley. At a glance, one might mistake it for a real mouse. This caused the little Shadowmouse, Bebe, to begin squeaking wildly.

From start to finish, this was done at one go!

“What an amazing feeling.” Only now did Linley realize that his spiritual essence had improved dramatically.

A white-robed Doehring Cowart smiled at him cheerily from the side. “Linley, starting today, you can just barely be considered to have mastered the basics. Have you felt that special feeling yet? But your work can only be considered to be a superficial pseudo-artwork. It’s only worthy of being placed in the standard hall at the Proulx Institute. If you show it off there, I would be humiliated. Destroy it.”

“Yes, Grandpa Doehring.”

The straight chisel in Linley’s hand flashed many times, and the statue suddenly became divided into more than ten pieces. This year, Linley finally had mastered the basics of stonesculpting!

And this year, Linley was thirteen years old!

Day after day, year after year.

After mastering the basics of stonesculpting, Linley’s spiritual essence began to improve at a much more rapid pace. Specifically, when Linley was nine and a half, he had become a magus of the second rank, and when he was eleven, he had become a magus of the third rank. And when he was thirteen, he had become a magus of the fourth rank!

Magi found it harder and harder to advance in ranks as they grew more powerful. Logically speaking, from the fourth to the fifth rank, it should have taken Linley at least three years.

But in reality...

In year 9996 of the Yulan calendar, when Linley was fourteen and a half, he reached the rank of a magus of the fifth rank. From the fourth rank to the fifth rank, he only spent a year and a half. It was even faster than when he advanced from the third to the fourth rank.

This was the benefit of entering the Straight Chisel School!

.....

Year 9997 of the Yulan calendar was the seventh year Linley had spent at the Ernst Institute. This year, Linley was fifteen years old.

Wearing a sky-blue robe, Linley was walking on a road within the Ernst Institute. On Linley's shoulders, the little Shadowmouse 'Bebe' continued to stand. Although six or seven years had passed, Bebe's body hadn't changed in the slightest.

By now, Linley was 1.8 meters tall and gave off a very steady, stable air. Earth and wind elemental essences had continuously nourished his body. Combined with Linley's nonstop training, and the advantages provided by his Dragonblood Warrior heritage, Linley had already become a warrior of the fourth rank.

He could easily lift boulders which weighed hundreds of pounds, and shatter rocks with his punches.

His study of the Straight Chisel School of stonesculpting had also caused Linley's spiritual essence to constantly improve ever since he was thirteen.

At the start of year 9997 of the Yulan calendar, Linley entered the fifth grade class at the Ernst Institute, the same grade as the Ernst Institute's number one genius, Dixie. It had taken Dixie three years to advance from the fourth rank to the fifth rank, but up until now, he still had not been able to advance from the fifth rank to the sixth.

Fifteen years old. A magus of the fifth rank!

Linley and Dixie both could definitely be considered freaks of nature. But in the hearts of the vast majority, Linley was even more of a freak, because since the day he took the ability assessment for the fourth rank, he had spent only a year and a half before attaining the fifth rank.

Linley's astonishing rate of improvement had shocked everyone.

Now, Linley was ranked along with Dixie as being the publicly acknowledged 'Two Ultimate Geniuses' of the Ernst Institute.

"Look, it is Linley. Two years ago, he became a magus of the fourth rank, and just last year, he became a magus of the fifth rank in just one year! Too amazing. I predict that Linley will become a magus of the sixth rank before Dixie does."

"Linley spends every day training in the back mountains. I hear that recently, Dixie has also begun to train hard at the rear mountains. Most likely, he's being influenced by Linley."

“Very possible. Given Linley’s astonishing rate of improvement, very possibly he will supplant Dixie and become the number one genius of the Ernst Institute.”

.....

On the street, there were many people who, upon seeing Linley, began to discuss him amongst themselves. As the acknowledged genius of the Ernst Institute, no matter where he went, people would discuss him. But although Linley’s strength continued to increase, he still refused to participate in the yearly tournaments.

“Genius?” Linley mocked himself.

Linley had never considered himself a genius. His strength came from intensive training every single day. For six years, he had been as steadfast as he was the first day. And that, combined with guidance from Grandpa Doehring, was what gave him his current accomplishments.

“But right now, my strength is actually less than that of Bebe’s.” Linley glanced at Bebe on his shoulders. “Bebe, what rank of power have you reached?”

“Squeak squeak.” Bebe smirked at Linley, then said to him mentally, “I don’t know either, since I’ve never competed against any other magical beasts. But you definitely aren’t a match for me, hehe.” Bebe was extremely self-satisfied.

Totally ignoring the worshipful gazes aimed at him by bystanders, Linley calmly left the Ernst Institute by the back gate and entered the mountains, once more beginning his solitary training. Those six years which went by like one day were the reason for his success.

Linley quickly and casually floated through the forests, while the little Shadowmouse ‘Bebe’ continued to chat with him nonstop through their mental link. “Boss, when are we gonna go to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts to test our strength? You are already a magus of the fifth rank. You can begin to test yourself. And I, Bebe, will finally be able to show my awesome abilities.”

“No rush.” Linley’s reply was very short.

“You are breaking my heart, man. I’m a magical beast, but I haven’t gone to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts a single time. What a tragedy!” After six years, Bebe’s abilities at self-expression had improved dramatically.

“Quiet. If you keep on making a fuss, then today I won’t help you cook meat.” As soon as Linley spoke these words, Bebe immediately shut his mouth and didn’t make a sound.

After entering the mountains, Doebling Cowart appeared by his side. Watching Linley, Doebling Cowart felt extremely gratified in his heart.

“Linley.” Doebling Cowart suddenly said.

Linley turned his head and smiled at Doebling Cowart as he engaged in mental conversation. “Grandpa Doebling, is something the matter?”

Doebling Cowart smiled. “Based on your last few works of art, I can formally inform you that your abilities in stonesculpting have met the threshold.”

Linley’s eyes involuntarily shone.

His Grandpa Doebling had an eccentric temperament. Any works of art which didn’t reach his exacting standards had to be destroyed immediately. Per his words, “If these works of art were to appear in the world, they would lose face for my Straight Chisel School, and lose face for me, an honorable Saint-level Grand Magus.”

Thus, Linley had been forced to destroy every single sculpture he had made, even though they could have been sold for some money.

“Met the threshold? Grandpa Doebling, do you mean?...” Linley stared at Doebling Cowart in amazement.

Doebling Cowart happily nodded. “Right. Starting today, after you finish a stone sculpture, you don’t need to destroy it. They are worthy of remaining in this world. Naturally, if you wish, you can deliver your sculptures to the Proulx Gallery to sell them and thus begin to build up a reputation for our Straight Chisel School. At the same time, you can make a bit of gold for yourself.”

[End of Book 2]

- Chapter 25